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BALLAST

MYRA SWEN

THE
STAR

OF THE
FUTURE



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BALLAST

BALLAST

A NOVEL

BY

MYRA SWAN

AUTHOR OF "THE UNATTAINABLE," ETC., ETC

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"Pain, suffering and failure are as needful as ballast to a ship, without which it does not draw water enough, becomes a plaything for the winds and waves, travels no certain course, and easily overturns."

—SCHOPENHAUER.

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CONTENTS.

BOOK I.

	PAGE
THE LAUNCH	I

BOOK II.

THE SWEETENING	187
--------------------------	-----

Scr 96

BOOK I.

THE LAUNCH.

*She starts—she moves—she seems to feel
The thrill of life along her keel,
And spurning with her foot the ground,
With one exulting, joyous bound,
She leaps into the ocean's arms.*

—LONGFELLOW.

BALLAST.

CHAPTER I.

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy; I were but little happy if I could say how much.

—SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN Grey Alison received her mother's maiden name in baptism she was no older than the average child at the time of its christening. That her eyes, after changing colour a hundred times, baby-wise, should eventually prove an undoubted grey also, and much of her life be painted in the same dull monotone, must have been due to that strange law of coincidence, the existence of which many people are pleased to deny.

From point of interest, her career may be said to have commenced at sixteen with the death of her father and orphanhood, when the absence of her step-sister at a French school left her mistress of the old Yorkshire home.

Her experience was gained on shore only, it is true, but place her side by side with Mr. Kipling's sub-lieutenant, and it would be a toss up which of the two to nominate for the sobering of Ulysses.

The first sixteen years of probation, apparently, must not count.

The seasoned man of the world, who bucks loudly about Waterloo being won in the playing-fields of Eton, would toss aside the milk and water records of a little girl's history. Let that be written for the young, printed in giant letters on untearable paper. He wants blood, action, life.

There are some questions that might be put to him.

Were all his soldier heroes unmarried? Did men dance with men at the Duchess of Richmond's ball? Has a wife no part to play in the melodrama of her husband's life? And, if so, have none of them served their 'prenticeship in the Theatre Royal Day Nursery?

It is true, nevertheless, that there was nothing noteworthy about Grey's childhood. Her mother's death had happened too early to cause her grief. Any void that there might have been in the little heart was filled to overflowing by the love of the idolising parent that remained to her and the step-sister, Firenze, three years her senior.

The lives of happy women count for nothing in epoch making, and one cares only to hear of eventful bread-and-butter days in fiction, knowing that the same truism applies to the golden age.

In a word, Grey's childhood was as bright and untroubled as a summer sky, not even lined with silver, since there were no clouds to line. She was happy then. After that, day turned to sudden night without even an intermediate twilight, as happens in the East. Dawn was long in breaking. If it ever came again in the fullest sense, each one must decide for himself after his own standard. The amateur artist covers his canvas with vivid green, monotonous as woods in midsummer. He put in no shadows. He is right, for he sees none. The master hand gives them often precedence of the lights, knowing that they give the picture life. So some

of us get our mead of honey at the beginning, and some at the end.

On a certain December afternoon, Grey sat in the Rose Room, awaiting Firenze's home-coming. It had been the boudoir of the châtelaines of Owlcliffe from time immemorial. Their characters might have been read fluently from the different styles of furnishing it had undergone. Firenze's mother had affected the French school. Brocaded walls, Louis Quinze mirrors, and satin-wood furniture had been her choice when the old Squire had given her *carte blanche* to spend what she liked on the room; and it was equally characteristic of Marion Grey, her easy-going successor, that she was content to leave everything as she had found it. She was the penniless daughter of a country parson, and had been brought up to lead a healthy, out-door life. Unless she had guests she used her boudoir little. "I have no time to sulk," she would say gaily; "I am an old man's darling now." That was eighteen years before. The poor little woman had been dead seventeen, and Grey had just had the room done up for Firenze. She had written for her permission, and it had been given readily enough. Firenze loved to have pretty things about her, but was quite willing for other hands to undertake the arrangement of them. She must not be blamed. There are natures that could not go through life without a courier. Firenze was as helpless at twenty as she had been in infancy, and it was the greatest pleasure of Grey's life to wait on her. At the age of two she had mounted guard over the dowager-baby, and had remained her faithful watch-dog ever since. The trouble she had taken over the boudoir was but one of countless labours of love. Violets were her favourite flowers, but she instantly banished the picture which her fancy painted of a frieze composed of wreathings of them held

together by true lovers' knots of palest blue on a maize-coloured paper. Firenze loved roses best, and she had been born in the City of Flowers. They were her birth-right, she must know best.

So she set to work, and almost persuaded herself that her sister was right. When at length the workmen left, she was ready to clap her hands with delight at the whole. A dark-red velvet carpet, so thick that to walk across the floor seemed to rest tired feet; curtains to match; walls of delicate pink, with garlands of blush roses painted on the cornice; and under the mirror over the mantel-shelf the motto *par excellence* of youth: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may."

All was in keeping. The electric light globes were in the shape of roses; the largest of the lamp-shades resembled a full-blown "La France." It was held by a scarlet Mephistopheles—himself not out of place in a garden; and an engraving of Pettie's "Decoy" filled the place of honour amongst the pictures. Due respect was paid to age. Most of the furniture was two hundred years old, and a cracked blue bowl of pot-pourri on a Chippendale table near the door seemed to beg alms of crumpled or dying rose leaves.

It would be a glorious, restful bower in the summer, with masses of the living flowers everywhere; but fault could not be found with the beautiful chrysanthemums, bowing their prize heads modestly in the raised alcove by the window. In the window-seat which ran the length of this little nook, Grey spent most of her indoor life. It was the only window in the house which had any connection with the outside world. It "gave" on the short gravel drive near the front door; and, by kind courtesy of overhanging trees of uncertain age, one peephole was left through which the road might be seen. Not a public road even then. It led past the stables to

a keeper's lodge, and then changed its name to "ride," and was lost in the thick woods under which the house nestled. Nobody used it but the gamekeeper, the postman, and the grooms, but in the country one is thankful for a blind alley, if one may not live on the King's highway.

Grey had provided for such times when she might be forced to work or read back to the light by having a strip of looking-glass inserted into the wall opposite, that she might miss nobody going down to Camelot.

She was sitting in her usual place that afternoon of Firenze's return. Her term of regency was nearly at an end. It had lasted but a year, and before sunset the reins of government would be handed over to another. They had lain somewhat heavily in her little hands at first, but now she had only to hold out her fingers, as it were, for each to fall naturally into its proper place. The box-seat was no longer hers, but abdication in favour of the rightful "whip" could not be counted anything less than a great joy.

To have her sister, once again, "for her very own self," as the children say—it seemed too good to be true. Nobody had ever been to her quite what Firenze had been, not even her father, and the relations between him and her were almost ideal.

The love of both parents merged into one he had given her; free access also to his great mind, which was thrown open to the child every day and all day, like a valuable library, and never closed to her however busy and worried the librarian.

Philanthropist, philosopher, father. In these three callings the Squire had been as near perfection as mortal man may be, but if he excelled in one of the trio it was in the last. His absolute justice alone would have won him honours in it, for he loved his younger daughter a

hundred times more than his elder, and to the day of his death neither of them ever felt the difference.

For, conscientious and careful as he was, there *was* a difference. Nature will out. In all unconsciousness he showered his all upon Grey with both hands. From Firenze he, unwittingly, kept back part of the spoil. Not in kind. There was nothing to choose between their playthings. Twin dolls, twin horses, and tea-sets abounded in the toy cupboard. Everything was in duplicate—the nursery a modern Noah's ark. As commissary of the soul only was he more lavish with one than the other.

The brains of the two children were fortunately such as to make detection impossible. Firenze was content with a lesser share from the vast store-house, not knowing what there was to miss.

In his intercourse with Grey like met like. Her intellect was a miniature replica of her father's—the bud and the full-blown flower understood the same language, and neither dreamt of speaking any other when together.

Yet, low be it spoken, Firenze ranked first with Grey. It is happily not always the most lovable who have sheaves of plenty thrust upon them, else some would fare badly. Not in the inmost kinks and crannies of her heart, not in the sacred holy of holies wherein no human eye might peep, would Grey have allowed even to herself that her father filled only the second place. There was not so much as a hair's breadth between the order in which her idols stood. Neither took precedence. If she had been asked point-blank to choose between them, the chances are that the well-pondered answer would have been in favour of her father by reason of his age, the unbounded respect she bore for him, and because he was the best man on earth. Poor unconscious innocent, poor Sapphira!

There are other ways of proving facts than by word of mouth, for whilst Grey's grief at the death of the old Squire was so great that those few who knew her well almost feared for the reason of the tearless girl, her joy that afternoon at the mere prospect of Firenze's return was even greater.

She sat immovable in the window-seat, when most girls of her age would have rushed aimlessly from room to room, excited and unsettled, or run down the drive to meet the carriage. It was her way. Never visibly did Grey Alison waylay either good or bad fortune.

In an age when the world lives against time, so to speak, there is little enough leisure to analyse what is seen, still less to dig beneath the surface for fresh examples. To such a tribunal it were useless to notify the existence of undercurrents strong as breakers, quicksands that have only to be touched with sufficient weight to prove their depth. The sight of the forlorn little figure in the big drawing-room would have made assurance doubly sure in the eyes of her jury. The stable clock had chimed four; making every allowance for the train being a few minutes late and Firenze's usual quantity of excess luggage, the brougham must be coming up the road even then.

Still Grey made no apparent movement, but she dug her fingers tightly into the cushions until her nails were as pink as the rosebuds on the chintz, and the steady swinging of the pendulum in the grandfather's clock in the corner was not heard for the beating of her heart, or so it seemed to her. It was the first time that she had sat down that day. A woman's slaughter of the fatted calf against her prodigal's return is a lengthy business. Man will do the deed quickly and to the point, and there is an end of it.

Grey's labours that day might well have been per-

formed by any able-bodied person in the course of the morning. They were not great. To arrange the chrysanthemums which the gardener cut for her in vases for Firenze's room, fill her blotting-book with fresh paper, and search in her own bureau for the particular kind of pen which her sister always used; not much else need she have done beyond ordering the dinner, and that was but a nominal duty as a rule, and meant reading the *menu* suggested by an experienced cook-housekeeper.

Yet Grey was called an hour earlier, was dressed and downstairs at eight o'clock on that dark winter morning, and in the kitchen long before Mrs. Hunter had written the slate. A *gourmet* choosing a dinner for his elect boon companions could not have taken the task more seriously than this girl of seventeen, who, herself, cared not what she ate, provided that the fare was wholesome and plentiful. The most momentous question of the hour was whether the traveller would hail good English roasts with delight after her journey, or prefer kickshaws and made-up dishes. She was so dainty—she could not picture her enjoying a good square meal in which sirloin formed the great feature. Grey made a compromise, and suggested *flet-de-bœuf* instead. Mrs. Hunter did not demur at the change, notwithstanding the fact that she had lived ten years in the Duke of Adair's household, and was accustomed to have the courage of her opinions below stairs at any rate. There would be fresh interest in having somebody critical to cater for. Grey gave little enough trouble. She and her duenna Miss Simmons would eat anything short of horse-flesh, perhaps that under a pseudonym. Masterpieces of culinary art were wasted upon them.

The servants loved their young mistress, but they sometimes wished that she were not so passive, and would assert her likes and dislikes. She was so quiet, too.

The organette in the servants' hall was often the only sound to be heard in the house after dinner, Grey seldom setting up an opposition with her piano.

Mrs. Hunter asked for three new bottles of colouring and went about her duties singing. Mr. Enderby had told her in the seclusion of his pantry something of the beauty of Miss Alison. There would be fun enough when she came home, and work to match. She loved company like her mother before her. There were not many neighbours at Owlcliffe, but there was much good horse-flesh at any rate to bring the young bloods across the county to pay their respects to a fresh pair of *beaux yeux*. After his own fashion, old Enderby drew a vivid picture of daily callers, constant rolling of wheels and clatter of hoofs in the stable-yard; but all his carriages were dog-carts, and side-saddles did not enter into his calculations.

Grey's maid also, that day, was reminded for the first time that her post was not altogether a sinecure. As a rule, she earned her wages very easily, to brush her young mistress's hair at bedtime and mend her clothes being almost the extent of her duties. She was contemplating a bicycle ride with the footman when her bell rang.

Grey stood in her bedroom amongst an archipelago of skirts.

"Burton, my old Oxford mixture is really too old for afternoons. I will wear my dark grey cloth skirt and the black and white silk blouse, and," hesitatingly, "you can do my hair, if you like."

Burton was delighted. Hitherto, her course of Hugo lessons had benefited only herself and the upper housemaid on their Sundays out. She hustled Grey into a dressing-jacket, lest she should change her mind, and, in

a minute, the dark glossy coils were untwisted and falling over Grey's shoulders.

"But mind, nothing elaborate, no puffs, no love-locks, just do it low on my neck, and take away those abominations."

She blew out the new-born flame of the spirit-lamp, and laughingly thrust the curling-tongs into the dressing-table drawer.

"Oh! Miss Grey, do let me crimp it ever so little; your fringe, at any rate."

"My fringe! Do you call six hairs that have strayed on to my forehead by mistake a fringe? Now, go on, and don't abuse your great privilege. I dare say that Miss Firenze will allow you to burn her hair twice a day, if you like."

"Is Miss Firenze's hair like yours?"

"No, not a bit. She has beautiful, fair, silky hair, quite different from my old mane."

"Yours is beautiful hair too, Miss Grey."

"Mine! Fiddlesticks! There is enough to keep my hat on, and that's all you can say for it."

This was not mock modesty on her part. At that time Grey imagined herself to be downright plain and insignificant. She had no idea that she was pretty. The knowledge would come soon enough. There would be plenty of men, and a few women, to tell her later on that the face reflected in the silver mirror was the sweetest that one would wish to meet in a day's march. The thoughtful grey eyes alone, set in black lashes with arched brows to match, would do something towards damaging hearts, and one might safely hazard an opinion that a certain red miniature Cupid's bow and dimples lying half-hidden in the corners of the determined little mouth would complete the business.

Contradiction was rife in the face at present. Tears

and laughter were so well balanced that the whole might equally have served for a mask of Comedy or Tragedy. It lacked definite character as yet. Ten years hence it would be worth taking away in memory's inside pocket, either as an enervating soul-tonic for the blues, or a warning against the sad havoc that adverse Fate and Circumstance may work in a sunny garden, if one does not bar the gate very securely.

With all the afternoon before her, Grey would not allow poor Burton longer than three-quarters of an hour for the tiring of her head and person. She sighed and wriggled under the process, and in the end, after two false starts, effected an escape to the boudoir, hooking her blouse at random as she went.

Still another hour. She stepped sedately up to her favourite coign of vantage, and felt like an eighteenth century beauty released from her powdering-closet.

A few minutes after four Miss Simmons came into the room. A middle-aged, grey-haired woman of the kind that, in the North at any rate, is better described by the word "body." She was a distant kinswoman of the old Squire, culled at his request from the bed of everlasting which produces bunches of Volumnia Dedlock's kind annually; most rich men have one in their possession somewhere, but its existence they are mostly pleased to forget.

Janet Simmons loved this child as though she were her own. For her sake she rejoiced that she was once again to have a young companion. Grey wanted rousing. She struck her as being unduly quiet for seventeen. She tried to remember how she had felt at seventeen.

Otherwise, she could not but regard Firenze as somewhat of an interloper, who came to spoil their happy *titic-à-tite*.

Grey did not hear her come into the room. She gave

a little start when Miss Simmons laid her hand on her shoulder.

"Sister Anne, Sister Anne, what do you see from your watch-tower?"

"I see an animated black-beetle scootling up the road."

"What eyes you have, child; it is quite dark."

"The feline instinct, I suppose—but how thoughtless I am! She must find it bright and cheerful. Home-light always means lamps and red curtains in my mind's eye, does it not in yours?"

She turned various little knobs behind the door till the whole room was ablaze with electric light, but did not lower the blinds.

"She must see the beacon welcoming her. Did Thomas bring in tea? No, I must have dreamt it."

Miss Simmons knew she spoke at random to hide her agitation.

There was a crunching of wheels on the gravel, then the sudden sound of the brake being taken off. Dead silence. Grey stood for a moment motionless in the middle of the floor, then she walked slowly out of the room. Some women run to meet their lovers regardless of spectators. Some walk, even when alone. They are not those who love them least. Given the chance, Grey would have turned back on the staircase, yet at every step her heart gave a great throb. When she reached the hall she stopped for a moment and looked at her sister. She was neither dusty nor travel-stained, but a picture of fresh girlhood in her pale dress and chinchilla furs. She looked more as if she had just left the hands of her maid than come on a railway journey from London.

She stood amongst a chaos of luggage, giving directions to Enderby and Thomas in the soft voice which

won her so many slaves. The old butler was qualifying for an apoplectic fit and stooping to lift a species of Saratoga trunk far too heavy for him. Thomas stood in the background mentally noting that the new comer was even prettier than the leading boy in the local pantomime. Greater tribute he could not pay her.

"Glad to see you home again, miss," said Enderby, emerging safely from an acrobatic position.

Thomas was not to be outdone. Happy inspiration came in the shape of—

"Shall I give Miss Burton your keys, miss?"

In the space of two minutes both men-servants had proved themselves willing to shout "*Vive le roi*."

The outgoing sovereign stepped quietly up to the new with outstretched arms.

"Oh, Firenze!"

"My little grey mouse, how good it is to see you again, and how pretty you have grown."

Grey looked at her in amazement.

"Have I?" she said wonderingly.

"Yes, little prude. Why, do you think that I have lived in Paris all this time and don't know a pretty face when I see one?"

"I didn't know," said Grey, "but I am glad."

So it was her sister who told her first.

CHAPTER II.

Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.

—SHAKESPEARE.

UPSTAIRS in the boudoir Janet Simmons busied herself with the boiling kettle, listened to the girls' laughter, and tried not to wish that she were young again. Still, nothing was further from her heart than complaint. Thanks to Richard Alison, she had had her chance in life. It was not his way to send his poor relations a cheque once a year, and ignore them until Christmas came round again. It would have seemed to him like paying conscience-money to a strange gardener for the keeping up of a grave in a distant cemetery. The paramount maxim of all those that he drilled into his children's hearts, and which he made them write in round-hand in their copy-books, was "Blood is thicker than water."

In a give and take world which demands an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, he yet remained obdurate. Certain duties of society he admitted and observed. He entertained in his quiet way his few chosen friends after his second wife's death, gave an occasional dinner also to acquaintances of whose bread he had happened to eat, but the custom that is spread broadcast over the country of feeding the millionaire to satiety on the fat of the land, and bidding poor Tom, Dick, and Harry the next night to eat up the broken meats found no adherent in the Squire of Owlcliffe. Never even in the days of his own poverty had he pandered to the ways of

Mammon. Coming early into an estate mortgaged up to the hilt, his brains had for years been his only fortune. Croesus would condescendingly have sucked that brain for him times without number in exchange for good cheer and the waste parings of kindness, but he would have none of them. He bided his time, and at forty took out the patent which gave him fame and riches of mushroom growth.

His shooting parties he arranged also after his own fashion. There was no favouring a stray lordling, nor cringing to the lieutenant of the county. They took their chance with peanniless relations who could barely afford their gun licence, much less the keepers' tips. When the moor was driven the butts were drawn for, be the company who it might, and it was the same with the womankind. Smart London girls in Redfern frocks rubbed shoulders with country cousins in ready-made tweeds, even on the "twelfth." The evening's entertainment was carried out on the same lines. Professional beauty might be sent in to dinner with ten thousand a year and a moor in Scotland, or be the temporary fate of a boy who bet on the bag in pence and wore waiters' white ties. If mammas objected to the detrimental element of these gatherings, their daughters need not accept the next invitation. Infuriated motherhood might remonstrate in high dudgeon with the host on his eccentric ways. So might some malicious person amuse himself by pouring water on a duck's back, for in either case the result would be equally unsatisfactory.

Janet Simmons was one of many who could testify to the pure disinterestedness which prompted the Squire's dealings with his fellow creatures. Years ago, at one of the shoots, a High Church clergyman, a college contemporary of Mr. Alison's, had been thrown much with her by his design, and had very nearly asked her to

marry him. So much he had confided to his old friend. That after all the proposal miscarried in some way was not anybody's fault. The Squire had told poor Janet of the little incident long afterwards, thereby pouring much balm into a gaping wound. Mellow autumn is a prettier name for the return journey than the sere and yellow leaf. The disappointed spinster regaled herself with memories of the past, and looked upon herself as a woman with a history, fully competent to look at the hands of love-sick men and maidens for the future and advise them what cards to play.

Out of the fulness of her heart she had given Richard Alison almost the whole of that superfluous pent-up affection which lies accumulating from year to year in so many women's hearts.

Since his death she had transferred it to Grey. In her she discovered fresh traits of her father every day. Her sunny, optimistic disposition was her mother's legacy to her. The old philosopher had taken life too seriously during his latter years, had constituted himself too zealous a partisan of the rights of man to laugh over much.

"I forget if you know your chaperon—Miss Simmons—Janet," said Grey, as she led her sister into the room.

Firenze's answer was to kiss the elder woman, French fashion, on either cheek.

"Of course I know her, though it is years since we met. She was not a chaperon then. Very far from it."

Those few words, that smile, were enough. Down went Janet, mown to the earth at the first stroke of the scythe on the triumphal car.

"I shall call you 'Simmie,' if I may," continued the vision in dove-colour, pulling off her suède gloves and tossing them on to a chair.

Grey looked aghast at her with the sugar-tongs poised in mid air. She was not shocked at Firenze's audacity. She noted gladly the promise of good-fellowship between the other two, but her father's upbringing would never have sanctioned anything like familiarity between May and October. He had not been unduly strict, but the maxim upon which he tried to model his whole life was "Let everything be done decently and in order." Under the latter heading nicknaming an elder almost at first sight certainly could not come. It is a blessed thing if the best influence in our lives lasts after its so-called death. In all doings of moment, and often in trifles, Grey still consulted her father's opinion, for she knew it by heart. With one exception, he had practised so conscientiously what he had preached that those few who had come to regard him as a demi-god were almost glad when he, too, proved himself a flesh and blood mortal like themselves. He had come down to their level; he no longer soared over their heads. It is to the man of the world who has been through the mill—to the man who *knows*—that one turns in time of adversity; not to unsympathetic perfection. Grey knew of the one lapse only by hearsay. It was in marrying her mother within a year of his first wife's death that he had violated convention, but the knowledge made no difference to her. He had been far from happy with Firenze's mother, and he was getting old. When he fell in love with Marion Grey and discovered that she had also fallen in love with him, he could not be severely censured for taking the goods which the gods provided.

Grey could picture so well the old man's gentle voice of reprimand, could almost see him sitting in the Queen Anne chair, with an elbow resting on each arm and his finger-tips pressed tightly together.

Firenze's voice roused her from her musings.

"Oh! the roses. My dear, dear roses; I can almost smell them. Oh, Grey, how angelic of you!"

She flitted about the room like a butterfly, uttering little cries of delight at every turn. Grey was repaid a thousand-fold.

"Come and have your tea first, you can play after," she said, "or does Mademoiselle take chocolate?"

"Mademoiselle drinks good English tea whenever she has the chance. Oh, ghost of 'Child's Guide,' what do I mean? Pekoe, Souchong, or—what's the third? Simmie, dear, help me."

Miss Simmons did not answer at first. She was lost in admiration of the girl.

Firenze lolled back in an arm-chair, with her feet on the fender. She had unfastened her coat; cascades of filmy white chiffon came to view and a silk lining the colour of Parma violets. A frilled petticoat of the same delicate shade peeped out from beneath her skirt; everything was in harmony. The frosted glass screen with hand-painted bunches of Maréchal Neil roses trailing across it might have been placed at her elbow by design. It was the most fitting background possible for the piquant face in the grey-plumed picture-hat. After all hers was more a "*beauté de diable*" than anything else. The blue eyes lacked depth of feeling, the mouth was wide, but the hair that waved naturally on the low white forehead was glorious and just the colour of ripe corn with the sunlight on it. A fairer complexion she had never seen even in a young child.

Years before Miss Simmons had spread broad-cast amongst her friends the intelligence that "Janet was thinking of being an artist." Painting, according to some people, is a craft to be taken up haphazard and learnt like carpentering or wood-carving by means of lessons.

Janet fortunately possessed enough artistic feeling to refrain from futile attempts to acquire what is in-born, but she continued to paint from copies in secret and longed for a brush at that moment.

Firenze's dower of brains was not great. She was not a learned woman; but she was good company, which is better. Stevenson put the matter in a nutshell when he wrote that "A while together by the fire happens more frequently than the presence of a distinguished foreigner to dinner." The hearth training is more profitable.

Firenze was very rich in the small change of conversation. She kept it loose in her pocket, as it were, for every-day use, and that is more beneficial to a chance wayfarer than gold and notes in a strongbox. She chatted away with animation about nothing in particular until the dressing gong reminded Grey of one or two household duties unperformed, and Miss Simmons realised that for almost the first time in her recollection she had sat idle for a couple of hours.

Firenze came down ten minutes late in a clinging white *crêpe de chine* tea-gown. Poor Janet mentally stretched another canvas, and commenced a *chef d'œuvre* called "Florentine Lilies" on the spot. Grey, in an old black satin, struck her as being quite insignificant. She hated herself for her disloyalty the next moment, and plumed herself on the thought that diamonds are found in coal.

Then the three women linked arms, and went down to the dining-room. Dinner was a merry meal. Firenze could tell a story well. She recounted the mildest anecdotes in her *répertoire* with such spirit that Thomas left the room with precipitation, and even Enderby's imperturbable face began to show signs of distress.

When the men had taken off the cloth for dessert and left the room the culprit heaved a sigh of relief.

"Now we can talk to our hearts' content."

She took a silver flask out of her pocket and poured a few green drops into a wine-glass.

"Whatever is that?" asked Grey.

"My tonic."

Firenze was not given to wilful untruthfulness, but sometimes a "Mirage de Tarascon" came over her un-awares.

"I didn't know that you had been ill."

"I haven't; at least only a bit run down; this picks me up."

She placed the wine-glass inside a tumbler, and poured water on to the liquid until it overflowed.

"Oh! but what a beautiful colour," exclaimed Janet.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Grey.

She had never so much as heard of *la muse verte*. Its notoriety was known to Janet, but she thought of nothing but how to set about mixing the paints.

"Now, I think I'll leave you. You two will want to talk secrets."

The idea of the *tête-à-tête* was not unpleasant to Grey, but she would not hear of it.

"Nonsense, dear, we want you to gossip with us."

"Yes, indeed we do," said Firenze, "I for one want to ask your advice. You see I'm rather in a fix. I'm engaged to be married."

Grey gasped. Miss Simmons sat down again.

"Oh! if it's a love affair and I can be of any use, that's different," she said.

"Engaged at school? How did you manage it?" said Grey.

"I didn't manage it. I don't know how it happened. There's a boys' school next door to Madame's. I was

a parlour-boarder, and allowed more liberty, being English. You know how one drifts into these things."

Grey did not. She could not picture any girl drifting into an engagement against her will.

"Do you love him very much, my dear?" asked Janet softly.

"I don't love him at all; but there was nothing else to do. I can't exist without excitement, you know, and it served to pass the time. Then you see he's French, and when it began I could not speak very fluently, and I fancy somehow that I must have said 'yes' when I meant 'no.' Two negatives make an affirmative, don't they?"

"In English; but what a dreadful state of affairs. Is he in earnest?"

"Terribly in earnest. Grey, you must get me out of this. I always do get into a scrape when I'm away from my little sentinel, don't I?"

Grey nodded.

"What age is the poor fellow?" asked Janet, "and what is his name?"

"His name is Jean Maxime St. Barbe, and he is eighteen, and he writes to me in violet ink, and wears ties with a fringe like a baby's sash. Oh! what shall I do?"

"Leave him to me; don't worry about him," said Grey. "He hasn't any money, I suppose?"

"Of course not, not a sou."

"Well, then, wouldn't it be a good plan if I wrote to him taking the matter *au grand sérieux*, and asking him, as your guardian, what settlement he would be prepared to make on you?"

"Capital, capital. Do anything you like, as long as you put an end to the whole affair."

"But do not wound his feelings," said Miss Sim-

mons, "remember you have never been in love. Let him down gently. Would you like me to write instead?"

"No, no. You would sympathise with him, and he would be over here by return of post. Somebody without a heart must do the deed. Let Grey do it. She has a soul above love-making. Well, let us drink to the future Madame Maxime whoever she may be."

She filled up her glass, and then leaning her head upon her hands began to laugh immoderately.

"He gave me a ring with a couple of doves on it and enamelled forget-me-nots. Oh! what an unfeeling monster I am to make fun of him."

"You must send it back."

"I lost it a month ago. I always lose my things in time. Have a cigarette."

She produced a case and an amber holder.

"If you want to smoke," said Grey, "let us go up to the Rose Room. Coffee will be there."

"Oh! do let us stay here. It is so cosy. We will draw our chairs up to the fire and talk."

She sank into one of the arm-chairs, and Grey did not worry her. After all, she was mistress of the house. The usual programme would naturally be subject to slight alteration.

Nine o'clock struck. Enderby was too well-trained a servant to come into the room as a hint for their departure, but once the buttery-hatch was opened an inch or so and somebody coughed.

"I think that the men want to clear away," said Grey.

Firenze had been silent the last few moments. She was amusing herself by making rings of smoke and watching them with half-shut eyes curl away into space.

"Don't go just yet. I'm so 'comfy.' 'Where I

dines, I sleeps.'” Five minutes later she was fast asleep.

“She is very tired,” said Grey in a whisper, “it is a long journey.”

Janet crossed the room on tiptoe.

“How sweet she looks.”

Here was yet another picture for her. The graceful white figure in the crimson chair and for background the old mahogany table with its freight of silver, fruit and wine, polished to such a pitch that it served as a looking-glass for the drooping yellow chrysanthemums. “The Sleeping Beauty” seemed the only title possible. That sounded very simple, yet was in keeping with its youthful subject.

Grey woke her and led her up to her room. She and Burton undressed the tired girl between them, and put her to bed. She fell asleep again as soon as her head touched the pillow, nor awoke once till morning. Grey, excited and feverish, passed a “white night.”

CHAPTER III.

Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.

—SHAKESPEARE.

IN the country it is always the expected that happens. As soon as Christmas was over Firenze was bored to death by the life of routine. The cares of house-keeping even under Mrs. Hunter's able guidance would themselves have been sufficient to wile away an idle hour each day, but she proved herself a *roi fainéant* from the outset. All orders came through her, but Grey was still the motor power that worked the puppet-strings. The chief received all the "kudos," the sub-editor did the work.

The little *affaire* with Maxime had been successfully nipped in the bud. Grey had written him a letter which had proved a challenge to his manhood, as she had intended. His answer was a high-falutin' renunciation of the love of his life. For himself it meant a blighted existence—confirmed celibacy.

Firenze heaved a deep sigh of relief when she read it; but the next day, having been rescued from the frying-pan, was quite willing to jump headlong into the fire.

"Grey," she said abruptly one morning as they sat in the window-seat working, "what are you going to do to amuse me now I've come home to you? I can't stand this existence much longer, you know."

Grey raised her eyes questioningly. Her life had been so full, so happy for the last few weeks that she had never imagined that Firenze was not equally content. She had dwelt among the untrodden ways from her birth,

and had never hankered after the beaten track ; but it was only natural that, after Paris, Owlcliffe should seem dull to Firenze. There are degrees of loneliness even in the country. First the outer circle where all the privileges of a town without its discomforts are attainable, and as one reaches the centre gradual diminution of the majority of them. Owlcliffe went near to the scoring of a bull's eye. It was three miles from the shed which claimed to be called a station, and as far in the opposite direction from a telegraph-office. Once a day letters came in. Time uncertain according to the amount of gossip retailed by the postman on the way. It is true that there was a church adjoining the flower-garden, and on most Sunday afternoons service was held there, but to ensure regular worship two miles by road had to be traversed.

Owlcliffe was a very beautiful spot. The Cliffland hills were thrown round it like an arm to protect it from invasion of wintry blasts and other enemies, and beneath the thick oak woods which served as a sleeve to the arm the large, square stone house nestled as cosily as a chick under its mother's wing. The architect had not strained after originality. Its counterpart may be seen over all Yorkshire to-day. In one way only it differed from the uniform manor house. It stood in the very midst of its glorious walled garden. The flowers and fruit were not kept out of sight like new clothes in a press to be seen only on occasion. They were for common use, and meant to be a constant pleasure to the owner. No expedition to the kitchen garden was necessary. Across the lawn, past the moat, through a thicket of trees, and one was there. The most outlying part of it, the humble spot where the rhubarb lay on its straw pallet with the parsley for company, below the salt, as it were, was but five minutes' walk from the house.

To add that barely a mile further along the ruins of an old Carthusian priory stood was sufficient surety for its charms, since monks had always the best of everything.

Grey knew and loved every inch of the old place. It never seemed dull to her, even in winter, but such a sun-trap did not easily catch gloom. Firenze loved it too, but could not forbear a hankering for London. There were days when she would gladly have bartered her birthright for a glimpse of Bond Street.

Grey had not eaten of the incomparable sweets of town, had not so much as seen the lid of the box. Firenze had just tasted enough to make country fare very unpalatable. In the summer it would be better she knew. Chance would bring youth in plenty past the lane end to pic-nic at the priory. They would see life then, at any rate, but now existence was unbearable.

She implored Grey a second time to find some means of dissipation. After a few moments' silence her face brightened.

"There are sometimes mixed hockey matches at the Heron's, but I am afraid that hockey is not quite in your line, is it? You would hate to run about."

"Yes, but there's no reason, I suppose, why I shouldn't look on and have a mild flirtation with the goalkeeper?"

"There's only one reason that I can think of, and that is that it's always a woman."

Both the girls laughed heartily.

"Oh! what silly games you do have up here," said Firenze.

"Happy thought," said Grey, "the 'meet' is at Shallowbeck on Monday, we can drive the T-cart."

"That's no good; nearly everybody is strange to me, and besides I know what Yorkshiremen are. They

won't look at a woman if there's a horse in the question."

"Oh, yes, indeed they will, except the new Master, who is a woman-hater."

Firenze dropped her work and sat bolt-upright.

"Who is he?"

"He's a Mr. Beaumont, a keen sportsman, from Lancashire, and he took the hounds at the beginning of the season. He was in some cavalry regiment, I think."

"Do you know him?"

"A little. 'We met, 'twas in a drain.' At least, he wanted a terrier one day when they were trying to bolt a fox in the big wood, and I went out and took 'Bogie.' He has a brother, too, who is at Sandhurst, I mean the Master, not Bogie, who had six. He looks rather nice."

"And so Mr. Beaumont is a woman-hater, is he?"

"So they say."

"Who's they?"

Grey was obliged to confess Mrs. Enderby and the postman.

"What constitutes a woman-hater in their eyes, I wonder? Most likely it's only a case of 'needs must.' There are precious few women about here either to love or hate, it seems to me. Where does he live?"

"He has taken a house in Oakby."

"H'm. Eight miles. Well, that is not too far. My education is not finished after all if I can't bring a man eight miles to see me."

"He doesn't bicycle."

"No, but he rides, and he has a pair of legs and can walk, I suppose. I think that I ought to be able to manage that, eh! mouse?"

She ran over to the fireplace and stood on tip-toe to look at herself in the glass.

"What are you going to do with him, if you get him?"

"If! 'If me no ifs!' There's no such word in my vocabulary. Do with him? That depends. Play with him first, and then let him go unhurt, most likely."

"Yes, as one lets a butterfly go, but what of the tiny feathers that stick to one's fingers?"

"Bah! you youthful cynic. Besides, the biter may get bit, who knows. At any rate we'll have some fun. A soldier can stand fire, I hope, even if it is the first time he's seen service. You shall practise on the brother, and I'll keep my hand in with misogynist M.F.H. 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.'"

She pointed to the quaint gilt lettering. It's a most excellent precept, but have a care, poor buds."

Then Miss Simmons had to be told. Firenze found her practising in the old school-room. She crept up noiselessly behind her and twisted her quickly round on the music stool.

"Listen, O Virgin! and the Scales—Grey and I are thinking of getting married."

Janet's hand came down like a spread eagle on the yellow keys. Her jaw fell in amazement.

"Both of you? My dear, it is a great step. Are you quite sure?"

"Oh, you need not alarm yourself yet. I said *thinking* of getting married. All the girls who think of it do not marry, happily. If they did the atmosphere would be nauseous with orange-blossom."

"You are not betrothed again so soon?"

"No, not even that. In fact, nothing has happened. I only want to warn you to prepare to receive cavalry at an early date. I am thinking of asking Mr. Beaumont to have the 'meet' here one day soon. We want to sample him and his brother, to put it vulgarly."

"My child, you had better save yourself the trouble, he's a woman-hater."

"So Grey tells me, and that's just the very reason why I am so keen to know him. It's very tedious riding a horse that bends to your will at once and never gives you any trouble, and men who go down like nine-pins the first time you look at them are equally dull. But a woman-hater gives one food for thought. There is some scope for the tactician when he appears. Do you know Mr. Beaumont, Simmie?"

"Only by sight. Grey knows him slightly. Oh! I wish that I knew something of hunting. He can talk of nothing but his horses and dogs, and from the way that Grey laughs at me when she corrects me it seems that they require a language to themselves."

"Oh! we will coach you. Let us come and find Grey now. It is so nice having somebody like you to enter into our plans. What a pity that there isn't a third brother for you. The younger one is Grey's, you know."

"My dear, I shall be quite content to help you. I have had my day, and have nothing to complain of. If my second-hand experience is any good to you, you are only too welcome to it."

Arm in arm they went up to the Rose Room and found Grey. A great conference of the powers ensued.

The plan of action was that on the following Monday Grey was to introduce Mr. Beaumont to Firenze, who, if favourably impressed, would straightway broach the subject of the lawn meet. Miss Simmons was to be in the cart by her side, and in case of emergency the two girls took infinite pains with her sporting education. At the end of half-an-hour her brain was in a whirl. Dogs were sometimes hounds, but hounds never dogs. Foxes had no tails, yet their tails were brushes. The run of the season was not advertised as she had imagined. Above

all, she was to be sure and not head the fox ; that was far more important than acquiring the correct jargon.

"If only it had been shooting," said the poor woman, "we could have met on more equal terms."

A voice from the halcyon past rang in her ears, which had seemed almost tantamount to a proposal at the time—"Will you come into my butt?" Often now the memory of that day caused her to pace her room with a species of heather-step. She had also on two occasions narrowly escaped a good peppering out covert shooting through walking out of line, and had once held the ferret while the keeper dug out a dead rabbit.

"Don't worry yourself, dear," said Grey, "you will get on all right. To tell you the truth, I shouldn't wonder if the whole thing ended in smoke."

"But I must be ready on chance. It's all very well being a good foil to you girls, but there's no reason why I should make you or myself look ridiculous."

Later in the day Grey passing the school-room saw her lying asleep on the sofa with a musty copy of "Beckford" on her knee. Tartarin studying the technique of "Big Game Shooting" did not surpass her in enterprise. On the writing-table was a letter addressed to the local tailor, marked "Urgent" in true feminine fashion. The current copy of the *Lady's Pictorial* lying open disclosed the sartorial secret, for the pattern of a neat sac backed covert coat had been cut out of the advertisements.

Grey did not disturb her, but went upstairs smiling. There are some smiles very near akin to tears.

CHAPTER IV.

Bright lamplight for the butterfly and a burnt wing by and by.

—D. G. ROSSETTI.

"It is time we selected our flies and girded on our landing nets," said Firenze, as the three conspirators lingered over a late breakfast the following Monday. "What shall I try him with, a 'Jock Scott,' or what?"

"A 'Butcher,' I should think," said Grey; "you mean to do the deed effectually."

"Of course, remember we are anglers, not angels; but I will not play him longer than necessary, I promise you. When once he really bites he shall be landed and put out of his misery."

"Landing is not so easy as you seem to imagine," said Grey, who knew something of the piscatorial art; "it is often a matter of hours and hours, and sometimes the fish proves too strong for the fisherman and he is pulled headlong into the water."

"Bah! who minds a ducking if properly equipped? I shall be in waders, metaphorically speaking, of course."

She pirouetted round the table, and then ran upstairs to dress; Grey followed hardly less excited. She had decided to ride Bear, the old shooting pony. A hunter was wasted in a country composed for the most part of bogs and precipices.

"Now, musketeers, are you ready?" said Firenze, buttoning her grey reindeer gloves—"Behold d'Artagnan, the King of Intrigue. I will not take off my plumed hat because it is pinned on, but I kiss your hand.

Aramis, thou shalt pilot us on my little Gascon. Por-thos, thy new covert coat becomes thee *à merveille*."

A drive of two miles along a straight road brought them to Shallowbeck village, which stood in a little inlet in the hills made by the course of a small tributary that was in no hurry to join the parent stream. There seemed to be no one astir in this sleepy hollow as the T-cart crossed the hog-backed stone bridge over the beck. Firenze pulled up the pony and waited for Grey, who was behind. Either they were very early or it was the wrong day. She expected to see a typical Yorkshire meet, when long before the principal actors arrive on the scene an eager pit awaits them, and the magic word "'t fox-'ounds" is the "open Sesame" which empties the school-house in a twinkling. There was not so much as a stray miner to be seen, and Shallowbeck was a mining village. Firenze had never been out with the Grassmoor. When she went to school it had been an unadvertised trencher-fed pack, each farmer or publican walking a hound or a couple of hounds, and the chief feature of the day's sport from their point of view being blood at any price. They were not particular as to quarry. All was grist that came to their mill. Fox, hare, fowl or good mountain sheep were equally palatable. They ran dreadful riot this republic, and recognised no President, but just came and went at will, returning independently to their respective billets at nightfall.

When Mr. Beaumont accepted the Mastership and arrived in the district with a few couple of well-trained hounds, which he drafted in amongst the others to steady them, he proved a blessing to the neighbourhood. Only a true sportsman would have undertaken the post. Much of the country was practically unrideable, bogs and other pitfalls abounded. He could count his neighbours

on the fingers of one hand. Often and often he and the hunt-servants comprised the whole field. It was a lonely life.

So much Firenze gathered from Miss Simmons as they waited on the bridge.

"We are twenty minutes too soon," said Grey as she joined them; "shall we have a look round the village?"

There was nothing very attractive about the village proper. The church and the inn were not particularly picturesque, still less the two rows of drab cottages which completed the whole.

"No," said Firenze, "let us go and talk to Jane Anne."

From earliest childhood a walk or talk with Jane Anne had been amongst the girls' greatest privileges; to withhold this treat their most poignant punishment. When other nurses would have stopped allowance of jam or ordained a term of residence in the corner these misdemeanants were threatened with bogus messages sent to the under laundry-maid.

She had left service some years, and now kept house for her father, the Shallowbeck farmer and inn-keeper. She was standing at her door with arms akimbo as Firenze drove up. None of your fine farmers' daughters who play the piano while the cows are waiting to be milked in an afternoon was Miss Jane Anne Prodgers. Once when her father after a lucrative fat-beast sale had offered to present her with the instrument which, in his eyes, was the hall-mark of respectability, she threatened to set broody hens in the top.

"Feyther meant it all very kind, and I towld him so, but what would t'loikes o' me do with a pianner?" she said after. "T'music of t'corn-craake and t'yoong lambs and t'powltry is good enoof fur me." Jane Anne was

a rough diamond in appearance and speech, but there was no doubt of her worth. She was of the first water. She looked like a cross between a Dutch doll and a Ribston pippin half-polished and rough-dried; might have sat for a model of Peggy Golliwogg before she cultivated the frivolous Roman Curl. There were no fal-lals about her. Her smooth black hair was as neat as the thatch on the corn-ricks, the straight parting might have been done by a self-binder.

Nobody quite knew her age. Doubtless she had jotted it down somewhere in the wonderful commonplace book which recorded the birthdays of her beloved live-stock. Her kind never seems to grow older, and nobody ever gave the matter a thought. She had been a lass fifteen years before. She was a lass still.

"Why, if it isn't my childer," was her greeting. "Miss Firenze, you've gotten back from yon frog-eatin' plaace. Well, it seems to 'ave agreed wi' yer any side oop. And you, Miss Grey, yer quite ploomp. 'Ave yer been livin' on bootermilk?"

"Yes, and had a hand in the pig-tub, too."

"Honey bairns, yer maake gaame of me."

"What do you think of Miss Simmons' new jacket?" said Firenze, who was in a wicked mood. "She got it because ——"

Jane Anne fortunately broke in with—

"It's a grand jacket, that and all. It's a deecal of trooble fettlin' oop clorthes, but yer forced to stick t'd fashions or yer thowt nowt of now-a-daays."

Jane Anne herself wore a prehistoric linsey skirt divorced from a plum-coloured bodice.

"And so yer 'finished' as they call it, Miss Firenze; yer'll be wantin' a yoong man now?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Can you find me one?"

"Me? I've summat else to do than to go trapesing

after t'likes o' them. They're well enoof in their waay, but they're mostlins daft, I'm thinkin'."

"All except William, of course?"

"Oh, Willum's not so bad in his proper plaace, but 'e's more worritin' than an aud clocker that eats her eggs. 'Im and me's kept coompany these ten yeer—walked out of a Soonday reglar, rain or shine, but 'e's nobbut fond, isn't Willum. 'E's all fer 'aving t'banns putten oop, and gettin' wed afore Laady-Daay. Dear knaws, I like t'lad and all that, but I arsk yer plain, 'ave I time to get wed and such like?"

"I think you're rather hard on him," said Firenze.

"I think so, too," said Janet. "Poor fellow, he's been very patient."

"Paatient! Has 'e? Why, it wur awnly Saturday forenoon he walked in when I was totting oop my accoonts. 'Jennie,' 'e sez, 'mebbe yer'd like me to coom round after dinner and 'elp yer redd oop this yance.' By goom! I sent 'im packin'. Fancy me reddin' oop with yon grate gowk a'moiderin' me at every hand's turn. Look ye! they're coomin'. That's t'Maaster on t'grey, but mebbe's yer seen 'im. E's a canny man 'owiver."

"No, never," said Firenze, looking askance at Grey. "I've heard that he's not fond of ladies."

"Hoots! What chance has the poor feller to do awt else hereabouts? He aims at gettin' wed all the time, I'll be bound. Miss Firenze, you wed 'im, and me and Willum'll dance at the weddin'."

She stepped into the middle of the road to meet him.

Firenze stole a glance at him from under her veil. Poor Janet remained silent and wished that theatres had not the monopoly of trap-doors. Yes, he would do, this new plaything. So much the spoilt child had decided already. She did not look very carefully at

him, but he struck her as being neither plain nor handsome—somewhat heavily built, with a ruddy face, dark moustache, and kind eyes.

The *tout ensemble* pleased her; the make of his boots, the cut of his swallow-tail coat. If there had been anything *bourgeois* about his clothes she would have passed him on to Grey without hesitation. Janet, meanwhile, was not too much overcome to take advantage of the first chance she had had of studying his expression. It was the dogged determination of the lower part of the face which struck her most. It entirely counteracted the mild benevolence of the steadfast blue eyes. She was glad of it. She knew that Firenze would succumb to the first strong influence that she encountered. Her constant prayer was that when her weak will did meet its master it should be a good one. If by chance Mr. Beaumont should be thrown much with Firenze, and fall in love with her, she would be quite content. Jane Anne beckoned to him to come alongside the pony-cart.

"May I maake knawn Miss Alison to you, sir," she said, with a dramatic wave of her hand.

Beaumont took off his cap with a deferential, old-world sweep.

"I think that I have the pleasure of knowing your sister—oh! good morning, I didn't recognise you for the moment."

General introductions followed. Beaumont presented his young brother, a smart-looking boy on a bay. Miss Simmons found herself embroiled, willy-nilly, then waxing very brave ventured on—

"What a lovely creature your horse is, and how pretty the red ribbon in its tail is."

"A danger signal, I'm afraid. If he behaved himself he would not be so fine. He's a terrible kicker."

"And the ribbon prevents it from kicking. How wonderful! And what a very little helm to keep so powerful an animal in order."

Grey threw herself into the breach.

"Have you asked Mr. Beaumont about the 'meet'?"

"We were wondering, my sister and I, if you would bring the hounds over to Owlcliffe one day soon. We might have a breakfast first and a lawn-meet after."

"I shall be very happy," said Beaumont smiling, "but if your lawn is bigger than a hearth-rug I'm afraid that you will be disappointed in the field. My brother and I and perhaps a friend will probably be all that we can muster."

"Oh! we will try and enlist some recruits for you. We will take the stable lantern and search the countryside for a man, won't we, Grey?"

So Saturday was fixed, and after a few words with the inn-keeper, the Master moved away with his hounds.

Grey stayed by Firenze.

"If they go straight up to the hills I don't know what you poor carriage-folk will do. No, hurrah! they're turning off to the left, that means the whins above the old castle first; you can drive there."

She touched the Bear's fat sides with her heel, and trotted after the select field. Firenze was somewhat piqued. She could have wished that the Master had sent back one of his servants to tell her which way he was going to draw.

Some women must always be first. If only they could be made to understand that with a man work and sport must engross his whole heart and attention for the time being, they would save themselves many a wrinkle. She would have turned the pony's head homeward if it had not been for the keenness of Janet.

She pleaded for another half-hour in order to watch Grey.

She and Fitz, the younger Beaumont, were riding together up the narrow road to the old castle. Grey smiled when she found him by her side. He was unconsciously playing the part assigned to him. She determined to enjoy herself. He was only a glorified schoolboy in her eyes—a toy-soldier kept in a box. There could be no harm. Soon they were talking with the ease of old acquaintances.

"So that is the old castle," he said, as they stopped before a ruined tower standing in a bed of nettles, its eyes or squint-windows filled with lichens. He remained silent for some seconds musing no doubt of draw-bridges, portcullises and sieges. He was truly only a boy, not yet past the Walter Scott phase.

"That is what I like better," said Grey, pointing to a little superannuated Norman Church opposite.

Its ashen face was cracked and lined like many an old pensioner's, and three-parts covered with a jagged beard of ivy. It had done good service in the past, and was best left alone in its garden of sleep.

"It seems out of place here, somehow," said Fitz, "and look at those hounds."

A couple of puppies had jumped the low wall which divided the graveyard from the clump of whins, and sniffed in a professional way amongst some yews.

"They think that they are doing their duty, poor babies. How should they distinguish sanctuary from common ground? I would rather see the whole pack run through than a man fling away a cigarette-end amongst the tombs by the door."

"You think things out for yourself, I see, and I'm not certain that you are not going to have your wish."

There was a whimper. The Master's cheery "Yooi

in there " suddenly ceased, then changed to a ringing wild "halloa," as an old grey fox broke away downhill into the open.

Grey had not bargained for this. It was doubtful luck. The Bear's coat was four inches thick.

"Take my second horse, do," said Fitz. "We're in for a fast thing. I'll wait for you."

It was too good a chance to refuse. Grey sprang to the ground. A groom hurried forward to change the saddles. In three minutes she was mounted, gathered up her reins and was off, groping for her stirrup as she went.

The long-drawn blast of the horn was not so very distant. If either of the impetuous pair had had time to look they would have seen four fields off something like a white table-cloth fluttering over a plough.

Poor Janet stood up in the cart in agitation. There had been no "with your leave" nor "by your leave" in the matter.

Firenze could not help laughing at her.

She looked so like a hen whose ducklings have proved themselves amphibious for the first time.

"One thing," she said with a sigh of relief, "those Sandhurst cadets don't marry. If they do they know that they will hear of it again more than once."

CHAPTER V.

It is the same in cottage or in bower,
A man, a woman, and an idle hour.

Courtship is but a long, dull grace to a rich entertainment and equally out of fashion. The *beau monde* says only "Benedicite" and then falls on.

—FIELDING.

As time went on the country mouse gradually became more infected by the high spirits and gaiety of the town mouse. Grey had always been happy, now she was superlatively so. She had learnt to look upon life in a different aspect since Firenze's return. Hitherto her father's influence had caused her to regard it as a problem, a riddle in a paper to which the solution is not even promised in a forthcoming number. Now question and answer appeared together. It was just an enchanted cup. She had not drunk deeply enough of it to determine whether it "sparkled only at the brim." She did not read Byron at that time, but if she had she would probably have disagreed with his views and pitted her opinion against his with the emphatic zeal of extreme youth. Perhaps she went nearer at that time to becoming a selfish girl of the period than ever after. Her old people were temporarily neglected. She sent Burton as proxy to the Weekly Sewing Meeting, and it was an effort even not to shirk her Sunday School Class.

There was something demoralising in the fascina-

tion of Firenze's society. Her very presence promoted waste of time. No one in the house quite escaped the contagion.

Miss Simmons for years had been the chief mainstay of an Odd Minutes Needlework Guild, and had hitherto substituted hours for minutes from sheer lack of other occupation. She now burnt midnight oil in order to complete the minimum portion.

Enderby, who in his young days had been a soldier-servant was accustomed to stand in front of the hall clock gong-stick in hand, waiting for the breakfast hour to strike. Miss Simmons and Grey had seldom been late. Now it was often nearer ten than nine before the trio appeared, but his only protest took the form of a suggestion that a hot plate might be purchased to save Mrs. Hunter the trouble of endless *réchauffés*.

It was those hair-brush confidences which did the mischief, he knew, but he could not blame them. They had so much to talk of now. He seemed to spend his whole life in announcing "Mr. Beaumont, Mr. Fitzgerald Beaumont." His tongue had to frame the words so often that he sometimes feared that it might substitute them at table for the formula "sherry or claret."

Things were turning out even beyond the expectations of Miss Simmons and Grey, and just as Firenze had ordained that they should. The luck of millionaires is proverbial. Gold makes gold. The spoilt child, accustomed to have every whim gratified, never so much as dreamt of defeat, and would have borne it ill if it had come, for the game of make-believe quickly turned from jest to earnest. She had commenced it with a puerile "Let's pretend," had in all good faith clapped on a mask of coquetry, but it had quickly proved to be of thin tissue-paper, and tore at once like a cracker cap.

In a fortnight Firenze was in love with Edward Beaumont and he with her. Like many another accredited woman-hater he proved himself to be the exact opposite.

It was wonderful how often he lost a stray hound or so after the day's sport during that fortnight, and it was apparently much easier for him to ride back to Oakby and change, and then drive the dog-cart over to Owlcliffe himself than to send a groom. Once arrived there he did not go straight to the stables. After some prevarication on the door-step, which Enderby sometimes prolonged into a passage at arms for the fun of the thing, he always contrived to be shown up to the Rose Room.

Only once was Enderby ever seen to smile while on duty. It was one night in January. At six the Master had arrived in great agitation at the loss of his best Belvoir hound, and had apparently been looking for it in the boudoir ever since. An hour later Fitz came in search of his brother. Diggory had qualms about the grouse in the gun-room story. Enderby's heel of Achilles was touched by that game of hide and seek.

March came and went and still Beaumont did not make any definite offer of marriage. He was hard hit, as anybody could see. On non-hunting days he seemed to wish for nothing better than to sit in front of the Rose Room fire with a cigarette, listening to Firenze's constant chatter and watching her knit. All nice women worked, and worked well. As the shooting-stocking grew before his eyes, he was struck by the capability of the delicate white hands that manipulated the needles so cleverly. He did not know how helpless they were in reality, that Miss Simmons turned the heels in private. In admiring the photograph of a pretty baby the nurse's hand that clutches it from

behind is not seen. To all intents and purposes it stands alone.

"I wish that you had only one leg," said Firenze one April day as she measured Penelope's web by the pattern.

"I may have yet. That last fall nearly did for me. My riding muscle is not right yet. That is why I couldn't hunt this week, but I can't complain. I am quite content."

"It hurts you still. You are in pain. I had no idea that that was why you cancelled the meets. I thought that that ——"

"No, it was not that," he said meaningly. "I have always made a rule never to disappoint the public, even in my small way. If Reed could have hunted them, they should have gone out as usual."

"You ought to have told us that your leg hurt you all the same."

"It is nothing. In times of great excitement and happiness, you know, one doesn't even know that one is in pain."

"What has been your excitement here?" said Firenze, "watching me drop stitches, or allowing Simmie to draw you? There is a certain amount of excitement about that, certainly. She painted one of father's liver spaniels once, and it was mistaken by the servants for a sepia landscape and hung upside down for two years." Beaumont did not laugh.

"You *know* what it has been," he said gravely.

He made a step towards her, then hesitated, flung his cigarette into the fire and walked out of the room.

He was always behaving like that. The stocking fell to the floor. Firenze had pulled one needle out of her own accord without noticing it. Then she leant forward and burst into tears. They were not tears of

vexation and disappointment, but of genuine sorrow. She had learnt to love somebody better than herself at last.

When Beaumont left the boudoir he went out on to the lawn through the dining-room window, and found himself walking up the kitchen garden. Grey happened to be sitting on the wall eating an apple. He did not see her, but she caught sight of his face and judged from it that if a fox had crossed his path hard pressed by his beloved hounds right under his nose he would hardly have heeded them. Grey rolled off the wall with the precipitation of a cabby flying from a fire-engine. She was not afraid of him, but she deemed it best that they should not meet just then.

Something was wrong. The manœuvre would enable her to run round to the stable-yard and into the house by the back door.

It was evidently to be a red-letter day. She herself had hardly simmered down after the excitement of her first proposal. Only a few minutes before she had sent Captain Larkin, Beaumont's late "skipper," to the right-about. Fitz had gone south weeks before, "back to his lessons" as she expressed it. She had missed her cheery playmate a good deal, but various friends of his brother's had come to keep him company at intervals, and Calypso had not been inconsolable. Since they fell to her lot to entertain she determined to like them, and in most cases succeeded. They could all ride, and they amused her at any rate, but Captain Larkin she could not bear from the first.

He belonged to that stamp of soldier which is turned out by the hundred. They get their clothes at the same place, they speak the same language, they mostly worship the same god. Larkins' only distinctive badge was the possession of an unfortunate stammer.

The first time that he saw his old subaltern and Firenze together he saw which way the land lay, but there was fortunately no unwritten law of *esprit de corps* to prevent him from trying his luck with the sister, who was not a bad-looking girl, and might possibly prove a co-heiress of the estate. He had commenced the siege by mounting her on his second-best hunter. That was policy. Horse-flesh was an irresistible bait to Grey. She accepted the offer. She constantly rode the horses of farmer-friends or the Master's guests. It was no special mark of favour. When, after ten days' acquaintance, Captain Larkin had the impertinence to propose to her, she was dumbfounded.

She had no scruples about riding rough-shod over the feelings of her fortune-hunter.

"Miss Grey, m-m-may I say G-G-Grey?" he began.

Grey could hardly restrain herself from answering, "It seems you may not."

"You m-m-must know that I l-l-love you! Will you m-m-m —?"

"No, I'm afraid that I can't" (cutting him short).

"I know that my l-l-l-little h-h-h-h-hesitation is against me, but I don't ss-sss-tammer at all on p-p-p-parade, nor when I ss-ss-ing."

"But officers' wives don't go on parade, Captain Larkin, and you don't pretend to be much of a musician, do you?"

He had just left her in high dudgeon when she saw Beaumont coming towards her. She watched him vault the wall higher up and stride off towards the woods, then she hurried away to Firenze. A few minutes later she was back again and followed quickly in his footsteps. Instinct told her where she would find him. There was one place on the hillside where a clearing had been cut in the wood. To sit there in the bracken after the

wood-cutters had gone home, surrounded by the felled trunks of huge oaks, brought the peace of a country church-yard. Sometimes the barking of the shooting-dogs at the keeper's lodge below was the only sign that broke the silence. Even birds cannot sing all day, though the elated love-sick ones have a good try.

A petulant wood-pigeon had it all his own way as Grey came in sight of Beaumont. "My toe bleeds, Betty; my toe bleeds, Betty"; and then a pathetic "oh."

Here was yet another man ready to cry out for a pin-scratch. He was not even smoking—a bad sign—but just sitting on an old stump exterminating an unoffending family of pink fungi with his stick.

Grey was not one to stalk danger from behind. She went straight up to him and blurted out, "What have you been doing to Firenze? I found her crying as if her heart would break."

"Nothing," he said sullenly, putting the ferrule of his stick through the parent fungus and flinging it away into the bracken.

"Poor fairies, they will find no stools when they come back," said Grey, "you men must always be destroying something for the fun of the thing."

He looked at her. He had never been accustomed to talk seriously to Grey. She was such a child. He liked her undoubtedly. She was an admirable horse-woman, and there was no one to whom he would sooner trust his hunters; but up to then their conversation had always taken the form of the lightest language.

"Where is Larkin?" he said.

"I don't know, and care less. He has just gone out of my life, as the novelists say; at least I hope so."

"I thought that you and he were such friends. He thinks no end of you."

"A man likes to keep on good terms with his banker. If you dressed up a broomstick in a money-bag he would have thought just as much of it. He had the impudence to ask me to marry him this afternoon."

Beaumont sprang to his feet. He looked at the laughing eyes and plump cheeks in amazement. The sight of the round face framed in a little white lace cap would have surprised him less than this sudden announcement. Was she an infant prodigy, or a woman after all?

"You seem surprised. Of course, I know that I am not the sort of person that any man would really wish to marry, but ——"

"My dear child! don't misunderstand me. You seemed such a baby, that was all. Where have you learnt your worldly wisdom?"

"You forget that I have turned seventeen."

He laughed.

"It is a great age."

Neither of them spoke again for some time.

"I am twenty-seven," he said, "too old for school-boy scrapes, and yet ——"

"There was once a lion who was caught in a net. He was a noble animal, of course, that goes without saying, but he could not get out until a little mouse came and helped him."

"But I don't wish to get out of my net. Oh, Grey! you will see no difference between me and Larkin, but what am I to do? You know that I love Firenze, but how can I ask her to marry me after two months' acquaintance. If she had a father, or guardian, to look after her it would be another matter, but what right have I to come up here and steal a march on other men?"

"Every right. She loves you. I am sure of it."

"I sometimes fancy that she does, too, but she has seen nobody else. She can't possibly know her own mind yet."

"She is one of those people who never will. Her mind will always have to be made up for her. You don't know her as I do. If you don't marry her you may be sure that somebody else will. I believe you would be the making of her. If she *must* go I would rather give her to you than anybody. You would take great care of her, wouldn't you?"

She might have been a child entrusting him with her best doll.

He looked down into the wistful eyes, and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Take care of her? Baby, you don't know yet what a man's love means, but you will some day. Till then, will you take my word on trust?"

"Yes," said Grey, "I will."

Love travels post and all his train. His handiwork is to match. More plans of castles were drawn up during the next few hours than the ordinary mortal would have deemed possible. What is more, foundations were dug.

"Could the wedding take place in the middle of May, six weeks hence?" Beaumont hazarded the question. Firenze turned to Grey, who had constituted herself architect and clerk of the works.

Yes, it might be managed if all would put a shoulder to the wheel. She had also been turning over another project in her mind. Why should Firenze leave Owlcliffe and go to Lancashire? Could not Edward and she live there after they were married, and keep the place in order. It was a good idea. Firenze was loth to leave the old home, which she was just able to enjoy to the full, and Beaumont had learnt to love

the beautiful corner of Yorkshire very dearly. There would be legal difficulties to encounter, of course. He was marrying a minor, and although she was not in Chancery there were trustees to be conciliated. There was also a power called Red Tapeism to contend with.

"But if you can undertake to have your frocks ready, little woman, I will see to everything else. There's not much time, but you don't know what the Beaumont will *is* yet."

Firenze was a different being during the next few weeks. The magician's wand seemed to have changed her suddenly from an indolent girl to an energetic woman. Self was set on one side. She threw herself heart and soul into everything that was going on around her, and while others slaved for her she lightened their labours as much as possible by her thoughtful consideration, and those "little kindnesses" which most leave undone or despise.

She no longer lay in bed half the morning, indeed allowed herself insufficient sleep. Not a moment was wasted. She had not even leisure to write at length to her *fiancé* during his absence. Chiffons for once took a very secondary place in the day's work. Ten days in town were all that she allowed herself for shopping, and then she travelled at night. It was amongst her tenants that she spent most of her time. The little winged god is a great class leveller. As she told old women and girls of her happiness she found friends, who, in many instances, had been almost strangers before. She canvassed her candidate well and without bribery, unless loving-kindness and sympathy come under that head. Some of the people knew him already. Men mostly, whose life-work lay in the open air, and then *she* was the willing listener.

Firenze's wish was that every living soul on the

estate should be happy on her wedding-day, and her will was law.

And Grey was happy, too. At first, the brave show of joy had been somewhat of a mask, but when she learnt that she was not after all to lose her sister and had gained a brother after her own heart, her cup seemed full. "God is so good," she would muse to herself, as each day seemed brighter than the last. "What have I done that such blessings should be showered upon me? So many other girls have delicate health or poverty to fight against, or are cursed with a plain face. As for me, they say that I am pretty, and I haven't even a foolish love affair to worry me."

On the contrary she had two or three mild flirtations on hand which helped to wile away the time very effectually. Fitz returned at Easter bringing with him his Jonathan, one Matherson, under-officer of his Company at Sandhurst, and captain of the football. Grey's little talent for coquetry, which had been buried since Captain Larkin paid his memorable p.p.c. visit, was now unearthed and burnished afresh.

The woman who at some part of her career has not led on some man, not with intent to hurt but for the mere fun of the thing, both sides clearly understanding the rules of the game, should be taken on tour in a caravan.

In the woods, which were now carpeted with forget-me-nots, pink campion, and primroses, she rang the changes between many youthful admirers. She liked Fitz best still. The engagement had brought them nearer together. She sometimes wondered if she were beginning to love him. Often his face came before her when she was busy with the silly little woman things which filled her days at this time.

It was a beautiful face, with its clean-cut features

and dancing brown eyes. They could not always be dancing any more than the most willing feet could, and she was not certain that she did not like them best when they were still and grave. One day, when she and he had been walking through the fields they had come upon a dreadful sight. A score or so of traps with a dead or live rabbit in almost every one of them. Most had been throttled to death, the few survivors, with eyes literally starting out of their heads, were reduced to skin and bone. The keeper had forgotten that little corner of his beat.

Between them they had cut the strings and carried two of the poor prisoners home. As they were coming away, they noticed for the first time a tiny corpse in an out-lying trap by itself. It could not have been six inches long. The bigger victims had at least been allowed the consolation of facing death in company. The baby had had to face it alone.

Through her own glassy eyes Grey had seen two great tears stealing down Fitz's cheeks. He had been the more moved of the two.

And he was so unselfish. Grey knew more or less his devotion to her, but he had been willing to give her up entirely to the great Matherson, quite content that his oracle should approve of his taste. She, herself, had put an end to the constant *tête-à-tête*, and begged Fitz to make a third. She had no complaints against Mr. Matherson, but she was glad when he went and she had Fitz to herself again. She was very proud of him at the wedding. He looked so well in his frock-coat. Jane Anne nudged her "Willum" as they went up the aisle. Her "Yan weddin' maakes anoother" could have been heard all over the church.

She dreamt of him often, but then she dreamt constantly of Edward and Firenze, and once even of

Captain Larkin, so that could not count. Oh! how would she ever be able to find out if this were the real thing or only one of Rochefoucauld's "thousand imitations."

She could not tell delf from china at this time. The marks were Greek to her, and they changed every few years she knew. Poor Grey! she need not have worried herself. There is one mark which is for all epochs, and there is no mistaking it when it comes.

CHAPTER VI.

My soul is my father, my title my worth,
 A Persian or Arab there's little between.
 Give me him for a comrade, whatever's his birth,
 Who shows what he is, not what others have been.

"FATHER would wish me to go, I am sure."

Grey always spoke of the old Squire as if he were still alive.

"Yes, I'm afraid that he would, but you need not stay long, need you? Could we not still carry out our little plan?"

"Oh, yes! of course, but think of what I shall have to endure first. They will expect me to stay a fortnight at least. Janet, they will kill me. I know what people are who live in Suburbia and call it Town. And then they are strangers to me. It takes a week to get used to a family's ways. At the end of my visit I shall probably still smilingly seat myself in Cousin Septimus' pet chair."

"Then you won't be asked again."

"Oh! if I only knew them it would not be so bad. Cousin Septimus came up for the funeral, that is the only time I have ever seen him. He is not at all the stamp of man that father likes as a rule, but he is his first cousin. His mother and granny were sisters—yes, I must go—I may like them very much, I shall try to at any rate. Mrs. Septimus writes a very kind letter; listen:—

"MANDEVILLE HOUSE,
"2 AVENUE ROAD,
"WANDSWORTH.

"MY DEAR GREY,—Your cousin Septimus and I read with great interest the account of Firenze's marriage in the Society papers, and regretted much that a number of engagements prevented us from accepting your kind invitation to be present. You must, I am sure, feel dull without your sister, and we should all be so pleased if you would come and stay with us for a time. It is always a nice change to a country girl to stay in London, and Hereward and Gladys will willingly show you all the sights. They went off by an early train this morning to the Trooping of the Colours, and are always ready for any form of amusement. Any day will suit us. Shall we say Thursday first? There are frequent trains from Victoria, and one of the gentlemen could meet you there.—Yours affectionately,

"AMELIA ROBINSON-SMYTHE."

"I know her already. She wears black satin and is fat and good-tempered, but the olive-branches, I am convinced, are excursionists of the worst type. On the day that I am let out you must meet me at Waterloo with tickets for Woking and the smallest of urns for my ashes."

"You will probably enjoy yourself very much, and write to me for an extension. It is I who will be the sufferer, left alone in London, and I never know my way anywhere unless I start from the Marble Arch. It is the only place in which I feel at home."

"Poor Janet! you shall have cards printed 'Miss Simmons at home, the Marble Arch,' and Gladys and I will come and call on you in your caravansary amongst the 'buses.'"

She spoke cheerfully, but was far from feeling so.

The ordeal of a first visit to a girl of her age is considerable, but she did not mind that so much. She had never stayed away from home in her life, but she had a happy knack of coming quickly to pleasant terms with all who crossed her path. It was disappointment that was uppermost in her mind. Her one glimpse of London had been during the few days when she and Firenze had gone up to buy the *trousseau*. They had not travelled far afield; had lived in a little world in which Piccadilly formed the Equator and Bond Street and Pall Mall the North and South Poles, but from the peeps of humanity Grey had stolen from behind the curtains while the bride-elect was being tried on she had judged that they were in the centre of life, and had laid in a store of comments for Janet's benefit. The outcome had been that the two had decided to take rooms in Town for a week or two, and now Mrs. Robinson-Smythe's invitation had spoilt everything. It had only postponed their trip, but Grey was a creature of impulse who liked to strike while the iron was hot, and was accustomed to aim straight for her goal without needless waste of time. The keenness of Janet quite destroyed the disparity in age. She brought herself down to the same stand-point as her charge; they might both have been seventeen with all the world before them.

Grey knew nothing of London, but natural intuition told her that it would not look quite the same from behind the pretentious portals of Mandeville House, Wandsworth, as from a small lodging in Mayfair; still it never occurred to her to refuse. She determined to put the brightest face possible on the matter, and arranged to go South at once.

There were not many arrangements to make. At

longest she would only be absent a month ; during that time the house would be given over to the spring cleaning, and she already pictured the pleasure that the smell of beeswax and new paint would give her on her return after the dust and dirt of Babylon. The leave-takings took up the most time. Her parting with the lilacs and laburnums cost her dear. They were the chief glory of Owlcliffe, and nothing in Covent Garden could ever compete with them for beauty. Then the young pheasants at the keeper's lodge would be big and ugly when she saw them again—not delicious bits of fluff. She had heard of a shop in Regent Street where newly-hatched chickens might be seen under glass with artificial foster-mothers. There was something uncanny in the thought to one who had watched a monstrous regiment of patient hens sitting for weeks. She was longing to see London, but it was a cruel, unnatural place from all accounts, and would, she knew, only increase her love for the country four-fold. She looked upon the two as quite distinct, as the poison and the antidote. There could be no binding link between them. Smoke, dirt and commerce, vain tittle-tattle and fashion could have nothing in common with the trivial round of life in a farm-yard for instance. Yet they played into each other's hands. The best of the cheeses were kept for Covent Garden. It had the monopoly of the pick of the poultry also, and there was many a pretty girl of Grey's own age who would have been placarded with the reserve label "For the London market" if the mothers had had the courage of their opinions.

Grey left home the last week in May. She did not even take Burton with her. Hers was one of those diffident natures which prefer to embark alone in a new speculation and stand or fall unaided. She would never

have dreamt of taking any one to the dentist's with her. Should there be pain to bear, she preferred to endure it by herself. Scenes of any kind were hateful to her, public emotion even under great stress almost an impossibility.

It had been arranged that her cousin Septimus should meet her at Victoria. If he were late she was to wait for him at the bookstall. Something had evidently detained him. She stood there for twenty minutes before he appeared. A fatherly porter mounted guard over her and her luggage. The round, rosy face struck him as being so young and innocent, so different from those of one or two other women who seemed also to have assignations at the bookstall, that he suggested her sitting in the waiting-room instead. "But I should miss my friend," she said gently, and then gave herself up once more to her pleasant occupation of studying the passers-by. She was not the sort of girl to be spoken to; she was too quiet, self-absorbed and matter-of-fact. People turned round in the street to look after Firenze. Her apparent helplessness would have led her into trouble many a time if she had been allowed to go about alone. Her beauty, too, was more on the surface—silver washed with gold—which appealed to the *dilettante*. Grey's required the magnifying-glass of the *connoisseur*. At last she saw her host coming towards her. An aldermanic figure in a top hat and short black coat. A massive gold watch chain gave the idea of being displayed to full advantage on a large cushion in a jeweller's window. There were rings on both the ungloved hands. The colour of life was assuredly red in the eyes of Septimus Robinson-Smythe, it was reflected even in his happy florid face and short ruddy whiskers.

He did not see the little figure in blue serge at first. His recollection of Grey at his cousin's funeral was

vague. Besides he never noticed anything black. It was against his nature. Neither did small things come much into his calculations. He had always been "out" size himself. To hold much intercourse with Lilliput was an effort, and effort was against his principles. He hated anything forced and unnatural. This idea formed the only bone of contention between him and his children. To him it was preposterous to turn night into day. He was glad for them to go to *matinées*, but a theatre at night was an unknown treat. His wife, who for her daughter's sake tried to be as much of a woman of fashion as an indolent, easy-going nature would allow, tried in vain to persuade him to change his dinner-hour, but he was obdurate. Seven o'clock was the hour all the year round. "If people don't care for me sufficiently to dine with me at my own time they are best away," he would say. Against delicacies out of season he also sternly set his face. He would give his friends an excellent dinner, but new potatoes or asparagus in January never figured in the Mandeville House *menu*. In vain his wife protested that they were not forced, that they came from Jersey or the Scilly Isles. "And the best place for them and for you, too," would be his retort. It was just this fixedness of purpose and hatred of anything artificial that had endeared him to Richard Alison. In appearance he was the last man to associate with the refined old aristocrat, but he himself soon discovered that the gaudy exterior was not a sign of poor soil like poppies and cowslips, but that beneath it all an active brain was being tilled and cultivated. Septimus Smythe might be eccentric, but he was not narrow-minded. It was no effort to him to think. He was accustomed to sift matters to the bottom, and knew his own mind, which is worth anything.

Grey allowed him to buy a copy of *Ally Sloper* before she made any sign of recognition. She stepped forward, but had to wait till he finished a conversation with the man behind the stall. The porter also knew him—"I didn't know as 'ow yer belonged to Mr. Smith, lady." Mrs. Septimus had had the visiting cards printed Robinson-Smythe for the last two years, and since Gladys came out an attempt had been made to pronounce the names to rhyme with "bo'sun blithe," but away from Wandsworth, amongst the people that had known him for twenty years or more, Septimus was still Mr. Smith, and would have remained so at home, too, if it had not been too much trouble to assert himself.

"I think that you are Cousin Septimus," said Grey timidly.

Septimus started, and looked down in the direction of the voice.

"Why, bless my soul! what a little bit of a thing you are. I expected to see a strapping Yorkshire lass of six feet or so, but they say 'little and good,' don't they? And a daughter of poor Dick's couldn't help being that, I am sure."

Septimus was very kind during the journey down. He talked until the noise of the express made conversation an effort, and then handed her *Ally Sloper* at some deprivation to himself.

Mandeville House was a stone stucco-faced building, with a long flight of steps leading down to the gate. Septimus ran up it with the agility of a school-boy, and pulled the bell violently. His cry "Amelia, Amelia" was hardly less noisy than that of a man who happened to be selling plants along the road at the same time.

Grey followed him into the little hall. She was

prepared for the painted drain-pipe which served as an umbrella-stand—would have been quite disappointed if it had not been there. Septimus threw open a door on the right. A tall, stout woman came towards them, red-cheeked, placid, with neatly parted light brown hair—the sort of woman who, for some unknown reason, suggests the name “Fanny.” She seemed to have been asleep. She was wise. To snatch so much as forty winks after her husband came home was an impossibility. She wore black satin relieved with touches of scarlet chiffon. For the trimmings Septimus was probably responsible. She was decidedly a black satin woman; they had probably been added for the sake of euphony.

“I am very glad to see you,” she said, rubbing her eyes, “but to tell you the truth I cannot see you very well yet. I have just been having a little nap. Thursday is my ‘day.’ Ever since half-past three I’ve been talking a lot of twaddle, and have drunk endless cups of tea. Yours will be here in a minute, Grey.”

“Grey! What a queer name to give a child,” said Septimus. “They might, at any rate, have called you after one of the colours of the rainbow. Violet or orange, not a nasty neutral tint like Jaeger under-clothing.”

“Your cousin is all for brightness everywhere,” said Amelia. “Look at this room.”

Grey glanced round it. She had certainly never seen a drawing-room quite like it before. It gave the idea that the owner had spent his or her life in opening bazaars and had conscientiously purchased something at each stall.

“Yes, everything bright, from the fire-irons to my wife’s face, eh! old lady?” giving her a kiss which would have waked the dead.

The maid who brought the tea placed a pair of

wool-worked slippers by her master's chair, and took away the boots which he had just taken off. His cup was placed on a little table at his elbow and *Ally Sloper* propped up against a case of wax flowers.

"Now you two talk 'bonnets,'" he said, "while I read my paper."

"I'm sorry that Gladys is not here to welcome you," said Amelia, "but Hereward came home early this afternoon, and they have gone round the Common on their 'bikes.'"

Almost at that moment the ringing of a bicycle bell outside the window attracted their attention, and the next minute Miss Robinson-Smythe bounced into the room, hot, dishevelled, breathless, with a sailor's hat resting crookedly on a large "bun" of untidy brown hair. Septimus did not approve of curling-tongs. It was a pity that he had not put a veto upon them before his daughter's fringe was cut. As it was it had grown nearly down to her eyebrows. Grey realised the abuse of blue serge for the first time. It had always struck her as the most ladylike garb possible. Now she wished she had selected some other material for everyday wear.

"How d'ye do," said Gladys, giving Grey a salt kiss, the penalty of kinship. "I'm awfully sorry that I'm so late, but 'Herry' and I met another fellow on the Common, young Mr. Tompkins, ma."

"And he's not only on the Common but out of the common, like all the rest, I suppose," said Septimus.

"You always seem to be meeting other fellows, it strikes me, miss," was her doting mother's answer.

"Well, pretty often, I must say. 'Herry' has such heaps of gentlemen friends, haven't you 'Herry'?"

The sight of his sister had prepared Grey for Here-

ward's appearance. In that class the woman is always superior to the man.

Something in a cellular grey suit bound with black braid stood in the door-way. It took off its cap and a shock of hair fell on to its forehead.

"Come in, my boy," said Septimus. "Here's your cousin Grey."

"I'm hardly fit to speak to strange young ladies, pater. I think that I'll go and change first."

"Nonsense, 'Herry.' Come and show her that we have as good specimens of athletes here as they have in Yorkshire."

Hereward was the apple of his father's eye. His devotion sometimes caused him to make a fool of him. He must have been well into his teens. Grey was sorry that he should be trotted out for her edification, and to his own discomfort. She tried to say something encouraging, and then fortunately an ormolu clock reminded them that it was half-past six.

"And we dine at seven!" said Amelia. "Gladys, take Grey to her room."

"I hope that we shall be pals," said Gladys, "I know so few girls. All my friends seem to be gentlemen, somehow" (with a giggle). "I say, have you got a 'mash'?"

"A what?"

"A 'mash.' A young man."

"Oh! no. I'm not out, you know. I'm not quite eighteen yet."

"Age has nothing to do with it. I had quite a serious affair at seventeen—dead flowers and photos under pillows, and all that ——"

"Oh! I've had a little fun, of course, if that's what you mean; but I'm not engaged or anything of that sort."

"Why, no more am I, and don't mean to be. I've far too good a time; but you're not above a little harmless flirtation, so I must find you somebody."

A portrait gallery of Hereward's friends seemed to pass through Grey's mind in review order.

"I'm not above it, of course, but I don't care much about men. I'd much rather be with you."

"But you can't be with me without seeing a good many young men, I'm afraid. This house is a sort of boy's home and hospital. They come here when they're hurt and vexed in any way, and Ma and I render first aid to the wounded. Now, have you got everything you want? Would you like me to do your hair?"

"No, thanks," gasped Grey. Gladys was very kind, but she was not anxious to have another haymaking amongst her neat coils.

"Then I'll go. We've only twenty minutes."

Gladly would Grey have lain down on the sofa for a short rest. Instead, she had to hurry considerably to be ready when the dinner-bell rang. The family was already assembled in the drawing-room.

Septimus' crimson "cummerbund" was the first object that met her eye. Amelia had not changed. Hereward looked cooler in a suit of brown dittoes, but seemed to have been unable to cope with the out-lying lock of hair, which trespassed over his brow. Gladys, who was wearing out her last summer's dress, whispered "How smart you are. I ought to have told you that any old blouse would do."

Dinner was a lengthy meal. Septimus always insisted on carving himself and telling long-winded stories the while. Grey could have forgiven him if they had been new, but they were all old chestnuts which even she in her inexperience had known for

years. He was also given to constant punning, and did not confine himself to his own language. French and German he used freely. With a polyglot punster she could not keep pace. She twice laughed in the wrong place in English, and was thankful when Mrs. Robinson-Smythe turned the conversation into a channel which she hoped would prove less fruitful in play-words.

"You will be quite anxious to begin your sight-seeing, Grey. Gladys, when will you take her up to Town?"

"We could go early to-morrow morning and have a nice long day out, if Grey likes. There is the nine train."

"That would do splendidly. The shops don't open much before ten. You won't mind me not coming with you? I will reserve myself for Sunday. We always go up to Church Parade if it is fine, Gladys and I, and take sandwiches with us."

"I've a good mind to come myself," said Septimus. "The Park will be very full on Sunday, being Derby week. 'Herry,' suppose you and I give 'em a treat for once? These giddy things want some one to look after them."

Gladys clapped her hands.

"Oh! yes, Pa, that would be splendid."

"I can't go, Pater," said Hereward, "my frock coat hasn't come yet. I'm sure that Grey wouldn't wish to be seen with me unless I were properly dressed."

Grey flushed. The boy had read her thoughts only too accurately. She tried to look pleased, but the prospect of joining the party of trippers was not alluring.

"Nonsense, my boy," said his mother. "Your black and white stripe is quite smart enough, and you've never had your brown boots on yet. You can wear anything

you like in the Park, anything. I've seen many a lord in the most extraordinary clothes."

"But I'm not a lord, and can't afford to do these things. It just makes all the difference."

Grey could not help liking the boy. He seemed to be the only one of the family who saw the fitness of things. His parents and sister had done their best to spoil him, but he was still modest and inoffensive. Struggle was rife in her breast. She wished that London were not such a severe test of appearances, but after all the chances were against her seeing any one she knew in the Park. And if she did, she would still be Grey Alison to the people she liked, whatever her company. A jewel in a vulgar setting loses nothing of its value. She could not bring herself to hurt his feelings by keeping a silence which gave consent to his views.

"Of course you must come, Hereward. I have no smart clothes myself. We can keep each other in countenance."

His face beamed.

"Of course I should like to come, but whatever you chose to wear you would look all right, and I don't want to let you down."

"Listen to our pretty speeches," said the proud father. "We are getting quite gallant, 'sonny.'"

"The father generally reads to us after dinner when we are alone," said Mrs. Smythe as they went into the drawing-room, "but perhaps to-night ——"

"Oh! please do not make any difference for me, Cousin Amelia. I will fetch my work."

The men were not long in following them. Septimus was one of those beings who cannot bear to be alone. He liked to enjoy everything in company with his wife and children, to take a family ticket for every sort of entertainment.

He appeared in a scarlet smoking-jacket, which served as a golf coat on Bank Holidays, with a large book under his arm. Gladys filled his pipe. Hereward placed the smoking-table near his chair. Glad expectation was on every Robinson-Smythe face, from that of the reader downwards. Grey hoped that his voice would not act as a sleeping-draught to her tired brain, for her work, a silk tie which she was knitting for Fitz, was not sufficiently complicated to keep her awake. She had reckoned without her host, and had yet to learn that in Mandeville House the only chance of rest was during the very few hours set aside for the purpose. The large volume looked like Shakespeare. She trusted a Bowdlerised edition, for she was certain that her cousin had not the foresight to eliminate so much as a word as he went along. Roars of laughter filled the room almost as soon as the book was opened. It was not Shakespeare. At intervals it was passed round that Grey might see the pictures. Septimus was as loyal in the matter of literature as in other things. Since the day when an old school friend had introduced him to *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* he had read every word of it religiously each week. The jokes are of a kind that one is apt to forget. Septimus guarded against such a dreadful contingency and kept them evergreen by binding the back numbers, and reading them aloud in the evenings.

At ten o'clock Mrs. Robinson-Smythe noticed Grey's tired face, and suggested that it was bed-time. Grey rose hurriedly. This was the moment for which she had been longing for hours. Gladys followed her upstairs.

"I say, 'Herry' is too shy to ask you himself, but he wants to know if you will bike with him before breakfast to-morrow. I'll lend you my bike. Can you be

ready by seven? Breakfast is at eight. Prayers, a quarter to, but you needn't be in for them unless you like."

"I wonder if he would mind if I went some other morning instead of to-morrow. I'm feeling so sleepy that I can hardly keep my eyes open. I left home before nine this morning."

"My dear! you *must* be tired. How thoughtless of me. Of course, he won't mind. He's taken such a fancy to you. He thinks you're a 'ripper.' No, you just lie in bed, old girl, and I'll bring your breakfast to you."

At last she was left alone. Yorkshire seemed very far away. She was not certain that she was not feeling a little home-sick already. It was early days, and very ungrateful of her. Everybody was so kind. She could not help liking them all, although she could have wished that there had been a little more repose about the whole family. She might stand the racket for a week; a fortnight was quite out of the question, but she could easily arrange without giving offence to have her visit peremptorily curtailed.

Then she fell asleep, and dreamt she was walking arm in arm on Margate Jetty with "Ally" and the "Dook Snook."

CHAPTER VII.

What sort of a world will the world be now?
 Oh, never again what the world hath been.
 And how happen'd this marvellous change?
 What the old life meant I begin to know,
 But I know not what may this new life mean—
 It is all so sweet and strange.

—OWEN MEREDITH.

VISITORS to Mandeville House might, in all good faith, be told to stay in bed, but to obey orders was another matter. It seemed to Grey that she had hardly fallen asleep when she was awakened by a lusty baritone voice singing what sounded like comic patter, but which proved to be "To Anthea." A running accompaniment of splashes was kept up for a while. Cousin Septimus seemed to be having his bath, and, like a Roman lady of fashion, wished all the world to know it. The execution of the beautiful old song was prolonged. It died hard, and after a short interregnum "Daisy Bell" began a tumultuous reign. The walls of the house were not thick. When Septimus came to the chorus a muffled voice from the top landing took it up. Grey wondered if she were expected to join in. She would not have been surprised if a book of the words had been slipped under the door. Seven o'clock struck a few minutes later, and Septimus proceeded to call the household, prefacing each knock with an unnecessary "Are you awake?" By the time the maid brought the hot water she felt that she had already lived through half the day.

The second turn on the programme was prayers. Grey could not be sufficiently thankful that she had no kindred spirit in Paternoster Row, for Septimus put into the reading of them all the expression that had been left out of the song. The psalter might have been marked *agitato, poco piu mosso, accelerando*. At breakfast his good humour was almost aggressive. His helpings of bacon were as large as his heart. After Grey had struggled through an enormous plateful he pressed eggs upon her.

"But perhaps you have had *un œuf*," he said with a pleased smile, and chuckled at his joke until the post came in.

All the letters were given to him. The study of character by handwriting was one of his amusements. Without any motive of curiosity he held an envelope addressed to Grey in Miss Simmons' pointed, Italian style for fully two minutes before handing it to her.

"H'm! decision, method, honesty. A very straightforward woman, I should say."

Hereward meanwhile was foraging amongst his father's correspondence for stamps. Everything was public property at Mandeville House. Nothing was placed under lock and key. Septimus had never had a secret in his life, and if he had had he could not possibly have kept it. Even the family skeleton would have been placed in a prominent position amongst the drawing-room ornaments as a study of anatomy. This modern Momus would have had a plate-glass window in every one's mind. He had known trouble, but his theory was not to isolate it to an attic and forbid mention of its name. He did not hold with the idea that part of a house should be dedicated to grief any more than to prayer. He did not approve of a little oratory which Gladys had improvised in a corner of her room.

There should be no set place for meditation and religion. It was meant to be for all times and places, for the common weal, not for cloistered seclusion, and sorrow sandwiched in between layers of happiness lost much of its bitterness.

"Mother, I've heard from Howard. He wants to come down on business to-morrow. We'd better ask him to dinner. Grey would like a young man to talk to, I'll be bound."

"Grey won't like him, I'm sure," said Gladys. "He's about the dullest man ever I met."

"Don't you listen to her, Grey. You leave it to me to find you a nice *beau*. He's no fool, I can tell you. He has an appointment at the British Museum which is usually given to a much older man."

"Ugh! that's quite enough for me. I always felt that there was something queer about him. Don't ask him to dinner, Pa."

"No, please don't ask him on my account, Cousin Septimus. I don't care a bit about men."

The advent of an interesting stranger who would prevent the post-prandial reading she would have hailed with delight, but she foresaw the manner of man that Mr. Howard would be. A clever bore who would monopolise conversation and pay clumsy compliments to her and Gladys at intervals.

"I must do the civil to him," said Septimus. "He is coming down on purpose to see my butterflies again, but we might ask somebody more lively as well."

"Tompkins is lively," said Hereward, wishful to do his sister a good turn. "He does conjuring tricks and swallows his knife and fork at dinner."

"Well, he would do with some one else. He's so small he wouldn't be enough by himself. One swallow doesn't make a dinner party, you know. Ha! ha! ha!"

"No, we must ask a very nice man, Septimus. Mr. Howard is superior to most of our friends. Major Brooke would do."

"Yes, capitally, mother. Howard was in the Navy, I fancy. The rival services can talk shop if they wish. You might send a note round to him, and I'll wire to Howard from the office."

"What time shall I say? Mr. Howard is sure to be engaged on a Saturday afternoon."

"Seven," said Septimus, shutting his mouth quickly like the spring-lid of a snuff-box.

Grey had not a moment to herself in which to write to Janet that day. Soon after breakfast she and Gladys went up to Town, and returned in the evening after many hours' tramp on hot pavements in the scorching sun. Mrs. Robinson-Smythe was out when they reached the house. Gladys went upstairs to put on her bicycling dress. Grey, lame and foot-sore, was hobbling after her goaded on by the thought of the comfortable sofa in her bedroom, when Hereward's head appeared from the basement.

"Grey, would you mind coming to see my engine?"

She could not disappoint the boy a second time, and followed him downstairs to a tiny room smelling of train-oil, where a greasy engine attached to a turning lathe by a broad leather belt was doing noisy work. Grey felt like a Cockney inveigled into a friend's stables. She did not know the points of an engine, and was afraid of committing herself by some remark of glaring ignorance.

Hereward did not speak, but an eloquent grimy face pleaded for approval.

"It's very, very nice," said Grey; "did you put it all up yourself?"

"Everything. I bought the boiler, that was all.

I've done all the fittings myself, and only had two accidents—bad ones, that is. That was one." He pulled up the sleeve of his flannel shirt, and showed her an ugly red scar.

"Oh! it must have hurt."

"Just a bit, I can tell you. Mind your hat." He clutched her arm to pull her away from the belt, and left five vertical black marks on her muslin sleeve.

"Oh! I'm so sorry. What a clumsy brute I am. I'll fetch a cloth."

"No, no, it's all right, really. Have you ever tried to work a sewing-machine with your engine?"

Hereward was stoking the fire. He dropped a shovelful of coke with a clatter, and the dust almost choked Grey.

"By Jove! that's a splendid idea. I never thought of it. Mater has a machine. She must go miles a day on it sometimes; we offered to give her a cyclometer for it. Oh! would you help me? We could save her a lot of work, couldn't we? Do let us get up early some morning. She's making Gladys some new blouses now. We could give her a beautiful surprise, couldn't we?"

"Yes, we could."

At that moment the dressing-bell rang.

"Oh! bother! it's half-past six, and I've never shown you my dark room, but you'll come again some other day, won't you? I *am* glad that you came here. You'll stay a long time, won't you, till after the dance?"

"What dance?"

"Oh! haven't you heard? We are thinking of giving a dance in July, on my birthday."

"Oh, I'm afraid that I shall have gone long before then," said Grey, who had registered a mental vow to be summoned to Town the following week. "How old will you be?"

"Twenty-one. It's to be a coming of age 'do.'"

"Twenty-one? You don't ——"

She stopped short. She trod on delicate ground. She could not believe that he had come to man's estate. She was hardly eighteen, and he seemed years younger. He took after Septimus, who was more like an over-grown schoolboy than the father of a family, and knew next to nothing of the world. The recipe was worth having which kept mind and body so pure and young.

"I suppose I don't look like it. I expect it's because I'm clean-shaven."

Grey smiled. His face was as smooth as a girl's. He probably could not have grown a moustache if he had tried. All his hair seemed to have been concentrated in the dreadful forelock.

"Do you think it matters?" he said, going towards a bit of cracked looking-glass on the wall, "tell me honestly."

"Matters? To look young? Why, it is everything. I mean to feel young all my life, and then I shall look it; and as for you, keep just as you are."

She went towards the door, and Hereward looked after her his poor, common little face aglow with pleasure.

The next morning's post brought letters of acceptance from both the invited guests. Grey expected that great excitement would prevail amongst the inmates of Mandeville House in consequence. She was doomed to disappointment. Septimus merely said, "I wish that Brooke could have come in his regimentals. They would have made a bright spot of colour." Gladys reminded him that the Major was only a "blue" soldier. Amelia tore half a sheet off one of her letters and wrote an order to the fishmonger. That was all.

Her staff of servants was small and inexperienced, but she could not always be fault-finding. If she had been told that the Prince of Wales was to honour her by coming to dinner she would probably have ordered an extra cover to be laid and allowed him to take pot-luck.

She and the two girls went out shopping after breakfast, paid the weekly books, and came back laden with flowers. In the afternoon, for the first time since her arrival, Grey was free to steal up to her room and write letters.

Her head and legs ached. She could have gone to sleep with the greatest ease, but it was uncertain how long her time might be her own; so she took her writing-board off the table, and, settling herself on the sofa, wrote a detailed account of the past two days to Firenze at Venice. She had hardly covered half a sheet to Janet when there was a sharp knock at the door and Gladys' flushed face appeared.

"May I come in?"

She jumped upon the bed, and looked down at Grey from over the brass foot-rail.

"I came to ask you if you know any lords."

"Any lords?"

"Peers of the realm."

"Not intimately. A stray one or two used to stay at home, but since father's death I've lost sight of them."

"You don't know any well enough to ask you to tea on the Terrace or anything of that sort?"

Grey shook her head. "No, I don't, and I'm not certain if the Upper House is given to such frivolity."

"You will think I am mad, but I will explain. You see, the mater made up her mind years ago that I was to marry a lord. She doesn't care a bit about big-wigs as a rule, but she has a high opinion of me for some

reason or other, and says that if she has to part with me it must be to somebody suitable. I have been trying to make her see that as I don't know a single lord even to bow to, I can't possibly marry one. She seems to think that that doesn't matter, that by some miraculous means, without courtship, I shall find myself married to one some day. I really think that she is beginning to grasp things a bit though, by the way she talked about Major Brooke just now. Her only alternative is a soldier."

"There are soldiers and soldiers," said Grey. "The term 'an officer and a gentleman' is sometimes only a courtesy title."

"Not in the mater's eyes. 'The Army at any price' is her motto. They are all smart and aristocratic to her. To marry one would be equivalent to having 'enclosure' tickets for Ascot."

"And they say that the 'enclosure' is getting more mixed every year."

Gladys sighed.

"Poor mater! I must try to be nice to the old Major to please her, but he is so dull. He wears the most civilian goloshes, and his moustache is like artichokes that have gone to seed. I wonder what you will think of him. I wish that you would wake him up a bit. He is so slow, always a few minutes behind-hand in everything. He never sees Pa's jokes in time; his very compliments are belated."

"He doesn't sound very exciting. And Mr. Howard?"

"Oh! he's duller. I've only seen him once. He's the sort of man who always says the right thing at the right time and makes himself agreeable to everybody all round, but you never get any 'forrarder' with him. How I wish that young Mr. Tompkins or some of

'Herry's' pals had been coming instead. They're such nice chaps. Well, I must go. What are you going to wear?"

"My bridesmaid's dress, I think. White satin."

"Oh! how nice you will look, but what a waste."

She went out of the room forgetting to shut the door behind her. They were superfluities in this house where privacy was an unknown quantity. Septimus would infinitely have preferred the paper partitions of Japan or the common room of the Saxons to subdivided solitude.

Grey felt very guilty as she finished the sentence which her cousin's entrance had interrupted—"and to crown all there are two dreadful men coming to dinner." Gladys was such a good girl, incapable of a mean word or action; so frank and good-natured and willing to share all the spoils of youth with her. The green-eyed monster was unknown to every member of the family. If it had put in an appearance Septimus would have commended its size and admired the colour of its flashing orbs, but he could not have put a name to it. Yet to write with restraint to Janet was impossible. "So, prithee, arrange that I may be recalled before the end of next week, and telegraph for those rooms in Half Moon Street. I would do it myself but for two reasons: that I never have five minutes to call my own, and that also all correspondence here is turned into a Limited Company in which each member of the family has shares. Do not misunderstand me. They are, without exception, the kindest-hearted people I ever met. If I leave them at the end of a short visit the chances are in favour of genuine regrets on both sides, for I think that they like me too, but as regards myself I am ashamed to confess that I could not answer for another week of it. The remnants of me would, I fear, be very cross and tired. The heat is tropical,

and would only be enjoyable in the big wood with you and Bogie and a book. The outlook from this window makes one hotter. It gives on to Avenue Road. The sanguine, loyal person who planted his encaged saplings in the Jubilee year had evidently great hopes of their future growth, but up to date they are sadly overhoused. And was it you who taught me that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west? Ignoramus! it doesn't. It both gets up and goes to bed just over Mandeville House, Wandsworth, and lies in wait for us to dog our footsteps when we limp abroad. Well, I suppose I must bind my hair for this 'Soldier and Sailor too.' It's so much nicer lying here chatting to you, but with luck this time next week I shall be with you in the flesh."

All the Robinson-Smythes were down when Grey entered the drawing-room. Septimus and his two children stood on the hearth-rug. Amelia sat a little apart reading a novel. The father and daughter seemed to be engaged in an earnest conference in which Hereward took no part. He was in dress clothes. It was an event, and seemed to prevent his interesting himself in anything else for the time being. Septimus looked more elephantine than ever with an isthmus of red silk handkerchief jutting out into the billows of an ocean of shirt front. Gladys was not looking her best. She wore a black satin skirt and a low-necked blue chiffon blouse of the shade which was known to Firenze and Grey as the "wrong" blue.

The question a-foot was, who should take Mrs. Robinson-Smythe in to dinner. Major Brooke was the senior, both in age and rank, but he was constantly at the house. Mr. Howard was almost a stranger, but only a lieutenant. The hostess was appealed to, but the laws of precedence never troubled her. "Settle it

amongst yourselves and let me finish my chapter," was her answer. In the end Septimus decided in favour of size and Howard, who "was taller and a more important-looking fellow."

At that moment the parlour-maid knocked at the door, and ushered in Major Brooke. By some accident he had arrived three minutes too early. Grey wondered if he would apologise. Her lightning epitome of him was, "What a dried-up specimen!" She could picture him doing wool-work in the long winter evenings. "Cheltenham" seemed branded on his face instead of the orthodox mark of the forage-cap.

Mrs. Robinson-Smythe greeted this pick of her visitatorial basket effusively. By nature she was neither snobbish nor worldly. She was too sensible a woman. Strawberry leaves possessed no fascination for her personally, but to see her daughter well married was her sole ambition. Since it had been proved that the peerage was out of reach she determined to court the Army with redoubled zest. Gladys had not exaggerated when she had described the glamour which she seemed to see shining on every wearer of the Queen's uniform. A soldier was in her eyes not quite like other people, but a being to be addressed with reverence and bated breath. She was willing to make deep obeisance to every bit of regulation faced cloth, serge or gold lace, that came in her way. That was to what it really amounted. It was the binding that attracted her, not the book itself, and there are many women, otherwise sensible, with well-balanced minds, who prove themselves as infatuated as nurse-maids on this same subject.

Major Brooke was elderly, with pepper and salt hair, in which the pepper-caster had had the longer innings, parted in the middle. His was not a very contented face. He had the air of just having missed something.

It had been so all through life. He had tried to ensnare the wily bird Success so often, but he had always found himself with nothing but the tail feathers in his hand. He spent years in inventing a mowing-machine, but did not first take the trouble to ascertain that some one had anticipated his patent long before. Another result of much careful cogitation was a self-lowering candle-shade which in its trial trip set his host's dinner-table on fire. And it was the same in his work. He knew his drill well, but could not apply it. There was a certain black day at Shoebury when by one of his strange manoeuvres his battery would have been blown to pieces but for the timely interposition of his Sergeant-Major. He was not practical—on one occasion he had taken an elaborate life-saving apparatus on a sea-voyage, but he had it packed in the hold with his heavy luggage. In theory, he was the keenest soldier, the most learned scientist. In practice, he had more than one near shave of being a murderer. Jack of all trades, master of none. A modern Bossuet minus the light-heartedness.

Gladys must never be allowed to marry such a man. The clock hand just pointed to the hour when the jingling of bells heralded the advent of a hansom.

Grey was all ears. There were the makings of an amusing evening before her. Major Brooke was excellent company. Mr. Howard might prove better. The cab stopped. The doors were thrown open with a sharp thud. The last strokes of seven were striking when once more Maria knocked for admission, and announced "Mr. Roward."

"You are very punctual," said Septimus. "Perhaps you take the great Horatio for your model."

"No, indeed. To be too early is to be unpunctual. I flatter myself that I have arrived exactly to the minute, which is far more praiseworthy."

"You know my daughter. Major Brooke — Miss Alison."

Grey had been standing behind the others, leaning against a corner of the mantel-shelf. She could not see the new-comer. She was sandwiched in between thick layers of Septimus and a large peacock-blue nautilus shell on a black marble column. Her first impulse was always to hide in times of moment. In babyhood she had always buried her head in her nurse's lap when a favourite playmate came to see her. Howard's voice alone told her that for once she had been a false prophet. He belonged to her own world.

A space was cleared between them—Grey's eyes smiled a welcome, without knowing it, as she bowed gravely. Howard started ever so little. He had come prepared to spend such another evening as he had spent once before at Mandeville House, of which the intellectual after-dinner talk of his host had proved the only redeeming feature. For the same reason he had come again. He was as keen as a schoolboy on his butterflies, but the social part of the entertainment on the previous occasion had not been alluring. Howard was not easily bored, and he never showed it if he were. He had exerted himself to talk to Mrs. Robinson-Smythe just as much as if she had been an exacting duchess to be plied constantly with *recherché* tit-bits of gossip. He had taken good care to choose topics well within her province, or, if she ventured to take the lead, to appear as interested in the annals of the little kingdom of Wandsworth as though it were a second Ruritania. For the sake of his work he would endure much. He was preparing a paper on "Noctuæ" for *The Naturalist*. He must dine somewhere, why not at Septimus Smythe's hospitable table?

When the other pieces were cleared off the board

and he saw a white queen standing in the background he was completely taken aback. He stepped forward and then to one side, almost agitated. A knight's move. Wonder took possession of his mind. How had she come there, this well-bred, stately little woman? Was it by accident? Did the Smythes know her worth, or would they treat her as an ignoramus treats a price-less *objet d'art*? Oak has been found white-washed in cottages, china hob-nobbing with kitchen ware.

Grey had only time for one swift glance at Howard before her cousin took her in to dinner. Her first thought was "what a splendid face," her second, "his chin is more determined than mine." The age of clean-shaven men is sometimes difficult to guess. He did not seem to be more than five-and-thirty, in spite of a whole skein of silver threads in the black hair. The mouth was his best feature. He did well to keep it uncovered. It was almost too kind a mouth for a man, but the chin told tales of an iron will.

At table Grey was placed between Howard and Septimus. Hereward, Gladys and Major Brooke were opposite.

Septimus was in his most loquacious mood. He never ceased talking for more than a few seconds from the time that they sat down. An enormous turbot and a saddle of mutton only served as a break to his fluency. He was a slow carver, but deemed anything better than silence. Grey was his chief victim. Her head quite ached from the strain of applauding time-worn jokes and trying to hear the conversation between her right-hand neighbour and his hostess. They appeared to be getting on famously. Most of Amelia's remarks took the form of a *vivâ voce* examination of Howard's accomplishments. "Do you hunt?" "Do you golf?" "Are you a cricketer?" But he answered

each question in full and did his duty manfully. When she asked him if he were a fatalist he was somewhat surprised at the sudden plunge from the shallows into deeper waters. A life-belt should be in readiness in case of mental cramp. He was a life-member of the Humane Society. He replied earnestly and concisely, "Yes, I am. It seems to me so much the happiest belief. Our tether is long, but we are only free agents to a certain extent."

He noticed that she did not look very happy.

"Hereward has quite a large collection. We are talking about stamps, darling."

No one noticed the *faux pas*. Howard hastened to offer the boy a "Mulready" envelope, and enlisted his service for life.

Then he turned to Grey.

"Have you come down from Town?"

"No, I am staying here with my cousins."

The last part of her answer was unnecessary. He liked her for it.

"But you know something of Town, I suppose?"

"How do you know that I do not live there altogether? No, you are quite right. My looks do not belie me. I am a country cousin of the first water. I have not even seen the Tower or the Zoo or Madame Tussaud's. One generally gets them over early, like the measles, doesn't one?"

"Oh! what a refreshing person you are. I have seen everything. Before I came of age I had been round the world three times. Now at twenty-four I am quite *blast*."

"Twenty-four!" The words escaped her unknowingly.

Twice that day her conjectures had been at fault. In Hereward's case there had been no harm in asking

him point-blank how old he was, but the age of a stranger she should have heard without comment.

"I look more, don't I? There are almost as many grizzly bears as black at the top of the poll." He put his hand to his head.

"But hair doesn't count for much, does it?"

Grey had recovered herself and was waxing quite courageous.

"How often in books it turns quite white in a night, and sometimes even in real life."

"Yes, but there is always a reason for it. When you have a few spare months on hand read *Les Misérables*, and see what happened to Jean Valjean. His hair blanched in a few hours during a conflict enough to turn his brain. Acute neuralgia is often another cause."

"Do you suffer from it?" asked Grey.

There were signs of suffering in the deep-set blue eyes. The question was meant only as a feeler. It was not a complaint to associate with a hardy sailor.

"No, rheumatism is the only legacy my years of service left me. Look at that." He placed his left hand on the edge of the table between them. It was a beautiful hand, large and capable, with well-shaped nails, innocent of the polish of manicure. Two of the fingers were gnarled like a vine stalk.

"But it isn't bodily pain that tells upon one so much as responsibility. When you have the charge of other men at an age when most boys are still at school and have to fight their battles and your own too, it is bound to leave its mark. I've been on 'my own' ever since I was sixteen."

"What a lot you must have seen. You make me feel more of a bumpkin than ever."

"Don't be ashamed of it. The country is best."

"Why, of course it is. Don't misunderstand me,

I want to see your great, wonderful London badly, but I'm not afraid that it will oust my native heath from my heart. The opera and the play and the Park are doubtless very entrancing, but at the end of a week I believe that I should wish myself galloping on the moors."

"You ride?"

"Every Yorkshire woman can stick on a horse somehow."

"But you did not mention Yorkshire, you know, or I should not have asked. I, too, hail from the dear old county."

Grey's eyes sparkled. The luck of meeting a fellow-countryman in the desert!

"Oh! I am so glad. From what part?"

"Airedale; and you?"

"Cliffland; quite at the back-of-beyond."

"I have heard of it, at any rate, though it was perhaps by accident"—(with a smile). "An old school friend of mine took some hounds up there, one Edward Beaumont ——"

"And now Edward Alison-Beaumont, my brother-in-law."

"Not really? How very odd. I saw that he had married somebody, but we have rather lost touch lately. As boys we had many a good day's hunting together. He was older than I, and used to pilot me."

"Edward is a splendid horseman. You ride, too, then? I always thought that sailors ——"

"But I was a Yorkshireman before I was a sailor, you know."

Grey suddenly realised that they were the only two talking. The servants were clearing away the glasses and silver. Major Brooke, who had constituted himself public entertainer to the Robinson-Smythe family, was *in extremis*. By turns the table-cloth had been a golf

course, a bicycle track and an engine-house, but without the knives, forks and spoons, which had served as bunkers, handle-bars and cranks, he was totally disabled.

"Cousin Amelia! I find that Mr. Howard knows Firenze's husband."

"Just fancy. How very extraordinary, and Major Brooke has been telling me that he must just have missed seeing us at the Lakes last summer. He was there too. What a small world it is!"

While dessert was being handed round conversation dragged a little. Major Brooke was absorbed in making an orange water-lily for Gladys. It ended by looking like an over-boiled globe artichoke, but all seemed satisfied, especially the artist.

"I suppose you are not leaving just yet, Miss Alison?" said Howard.

Septimus overheard the question and answered it for her.

"No, indeed she's not. She's only just come. She's seen nothing yet—none of the Exhibitions, the Academy, nor the Park even."

"Well, there's really not much to see in the Park. Stanhope Gate is the only possible place to sit now. I believe that they actually run trains up to Church Parade on Sundays now. It's nothing but a vulgar herd of picnicians."

A deadly silence—which no one dared break. It seemed best to Grey to carry off the matter with a light hand.

"You must be careful what you are saying. Mrs. Smythe has promised to take me up to-morrow. We should come under the same head."

"But you would not take sandwiches, and throw the paper about on the grass."

"We shall certainly take a little luncheon," said

Amelia unabashed. "You would not have us starve. I daresay, if you met us you would not be above having a drop of 'lemon cordial.'"

"Not I. It's one of the best drinks going; but to-morrow I hope you will bring your daughter and Miss Alison to lunch with me at the 'Wellington.'"

Grey caught a glimpse of a scarlet face opposite. Hereward had become more acclimatised to his clothes, and had quite enjoyed the last part of dinner. Now he received a sudden check. He had watched Grey in silence. Howard had had a fair innings, but to-morrow would be his turn. The unlooked for invitation took all the wind out of his sails, and Grey could not mend matters. It was impossible that the whole family could be allowed to impose upon his hospitality. Amelia accepted with alacrity. She had never heard of the "Wellington," but there was a military sound about it. It was probably a first-class canteen connected with the barracks.

"Well, you're a nice young woman," said Gladys when they reached the drawing-room. "This is the girl who doesn't like men, Ma. You and Mr. Howard might have known each other for years. You did wake him up."

"I could not sit glum beside the man who sat next me at dinner whether I liked him or not, but I do like Mr. Howard."

"You needn't tell me that. And what do you think of my old stick? I have to repeat 'Afghanistan' over and over to myself to keep my hero-worship up to the mark."

"Hush! you must not speak so disrespectfully of him, Gladys. We do not have an Artillery officer to dinner every day. It is quite the most superior branch of the Service—the smartest and the most useful."

Mrs. Smythe had learnt her lesson like a parrot. It was not difficult to put a name to her instructor.

Grey did not feel in a very talkative mood. After she had helped Gladys to set out the card-table she took her work and seated herself in the cosy corner. It was of white wood with red velvet cushions, utterly out of keeping with its surroundings—but a short time before an epidemic of them had broken out in Wandsworth, and Mrs. Smythe had taken the infection at once. Septimus had bought it for her just as it was in Tottenham Court Road. It stood out effectively against the rest of the furniture, which was chiefly walnut. He was prouder than ever of his piebald room.

The men did not sit long over their wine. When they appeared Hereward went and sat down by Grey.

"You have begun your part of our compact in earnest. I never saw anybody look so fresh and young."

"It is early days to judge yet. I *am* very young. It is later, when, perhaps, we shall both have had more to age us, that we must remind one another of it. But you do not look very happy."

"It's these beastly clothes. I got them ready-made in a hurry, and they're far too small. Dash!"

This last was in answer to his father's summons. Major Brooke had volunteered to do card tricks. Another pack must be found. Howard, who had been watching his opportunity, went up to Grey.

"You two looked very serious just now."

"We were philosophising. The boy and I made an agreement yesterday that we would always try and rise superior to circumstances and keep young."

"Well done! a splendid resolution. I wish that I could join you."

"Do."

He shook his head and took a seat beside her.

"I have done with youth and put away childish things. Work is the only thing left to me. There is nothing like it, nothing."

"I'm afraid that at present I'm all for play. You see, the school-room door has only just closed behind me. Our stand-points are different."

"Of course, and you will have playmates. But an only child in a nursery full of toys is a sadder sight than bare-footed urchins making mud-pies in the gutter. It is a dreadful thing to be alone. I am not speaking of the self-sought solitude of the student. I use the word in its literal sense. Do you know that I have not a single near relation left in the world? Only some distant cousins that I have never seen."

"Oh!"

She put untold wealth of sympathy into that one word.

"Men friends, of course, I have; one or two that alone make life worth living, but you see I left the service so early, and they are generally at the other side of the world when I most want them. Can you picture what it means never to hear your Christian name, never to be kissed 'Good-night'?"

There were tears in Grey's eyes. She scrolled imaginary patterns on the cushion with her knitting-needle, and did not answer for a time.

"You should marry," she said at last.

He showed her a thin gold wedding ring on the little finger of his right hand.

"That, too, is over. 'I have lived, and loved, and closed the door.' It was on *her* account that I gave up the Navy. The life of a sailor's wife is even harder than a soldier's. The manœuvres of 18— saw the close of my career. When we put into Portsmouth it was to find my wife dead. The child lived three days."

"And she was all in all to you?"

She spoke more to herself than to him.

"No," he said, after a pause, "not quite. I have never breathed it to a living soul, but you understand. She was a sweet, good girl, little more than a child. I thought that I had found the key to perfect happiness. It turned the lock, but it did not fit. I should never think of trying again. It might be worse the next time."

"It might be better."

"No. I was so sure of myself before. I don't know why I have told you all this, but I am not going to apologise for my egotism. You gave me the gift of your sympathy, to ask your pardon would be to accept it ungracefully."

"Howard, I don't want to disturb you," said Septimus, "but what about the butterflies?"

His voice jarred upon Grey like a child crying in church.

"It was about moths I wanted to ask you, Mr. Smythe."

"Oh! I know nothing about moths. Nasty, dowdy things. You prefer to stay here, then, with these butterflies?"

"Yes, if I may."

"Oh! I hope that we are safe," giggled Gladys. "You haven't any horrid nets and things, have you?"

"I'm not afraid," said Grey, "nobody wants the 'small white,' it is too common, but you, Gladys, might be mistaken for a 'Dartford Blue.'"

"And I for a 'scarce Swallow-tail,'" said poor Hereward, with a rueful glance at his "reach-me-down" misfit.

Howard did not move.

"You are an entomologist, Miss Alison?"

"Please, I don't understand such long words."

What a baby she was after all! Yet in talking to her he had forgotten that she was not a woman of his own age.

"Do you collect butterflies?"

"No, but I know a few of the names."

"I should like to show you my charges at South Kensington some day when you have nothing to do." He talked to her of his hobby, while Gladys played an accompaniment for the Major's songs.

The card tricks had not been a success. At the critical moment he had forgotten how to do them. He sang also just a trifle flat, but nobody seemed to notice, himself least of all. Septimus was beating time with a paper-knife. His wife seemed to enjoy the music best with her eyes shut. Only Hereward seemed to be out of his element. He stood behind the piano, with his chemical-stained hands thrust into his pockets. Grey beckoned to him. She introduced the subject of the marvellous engine, and left him to describe his toy to the man who had seen the real thing on a "man-of-war." It was apparently all new to him. He begged to be allowed to see the phenomenon some day. "And read Kipling," were his parting words as he rose to go; "every man should." Hereward thanked him. He did not know then for how much, but afterwards he realised that a woman parting with the address of her pet dressmaker to a dowdy stranger could not have done more.

It was nearly twelve o'clock before Major Brooke was got under way.

Septimus was thoroughly satisfied with himself.

"Well, Grey, what do you say to me?"

"Thank you very much for a very pleasant evening."

"That's putting it mildly, my dear. Unless I'm much mistaken you'll have to thank me for something more than that one of these days. Don't contradict me. I'm

a seventh child, and I've second-sight. Perhaps I see what you can't."

What nonsense he talked. She could not help laughing aloud at his earnestness as she began slowly to undress. Mr. Howard had certainly been very nice to her, had even singled her out from the others—the others of whom Gladys in the dreadful blue blouse was the most attractive. Competition was not great.

An hour later she was still sitting at her dressing-table in a white wrapper, her elbows resting on the clearing she had made for them amongst her brushes and bottles. Firenze's sweet face smiled up at her from a heart-shaped frame, but for once she did not smile back. Edward, Fitz and Janet occupied a three-fold screen. For the last two nights she had held imaginary conversations with them while she brushed her hair. To-night she cut them dead. The laughter soon died out of her face as she began to think of some of the things that Howard had told her about himself. It was a very sad story. Her heart ached for the lonely life, finished at twenty-four in his own estimation. And she could not help him. That was what worried her. If he had been one of her old villagers, or a child in her Sunday-School class, or a girl of her own age, she could have found some means of lightening the burden, if ever so little; but sympathy was all that she could give him, and although he had thanked her gratefully for hers that night his thanks had seemed finite. He had as much as told her that women no longer had any part in his life. Even if he did wish for their compassion it would not be difficult to obtain. There were doubtless a score of women in his London world willing to fall on his neck and weep with him, so, in any case, she would not count for much. She stretched out her hand to the writing-table and took up a red

morocco case which stood near her Bible. "You would have helped him, dear. You would have shown him the way out of the maze." She pressed her lips to the glass of the miniature, and laid it down; but the image of Howard was not so easily put aside. The picture of his home-coming haunted her. He was just the man to revel in the possession of a house, however tiny, and to feel an almost motherly love for his firstborn. She had seen but too well what it had meant to him to find the cosy nest robbed by Death on his return, and she judged that he had lived an alien existence ever since. "No one to call him by his name. No one to kiss him 'Good-night'."

Day broke. Perhaps something else dawned also. A wretched cock over the way rose betimes, and hastened to advertise his virtue in a chant of self-praise.

Grey took her letter to Janet out of her writing-case and sleepily added a pencilled postscript. "Please do not write for the rooms after all. I have decided to stay on."

Not a word of the dinner or either of the guests; yet when Janet read it she kept saying to herself, "I wonder which of them it is?"

CHAPTER VIII.

Sow an act, and you reap a habit ;
 Sow a habit, and you reap a character ;
 Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.

PHILOSOPHERS aver that there is no time like the present, since the past is over, and the future uncertain.

Grey was at one with them ; ready to "take the cash in hand and waive the rest," yet when she had time she took a peep at the dead yesterdays. Like most women she had them embalmed and placed on an open bier to prolong the agony of parting. The Eastern burial laws are the kindest in the long run. It would not have cost her very dear to bid them good-bye, for their place was never left empty. Fresh water replenished the fountain even before the old had had time to flow away.

It was the last Wednesday in July and the day of the Robinson-Smythes' dance. Grey had left Mandeville House some three weeks before. She and Janet were at last in the land of their hearts' desire, but they were to go down for the night. Town was emptying fast. The papers already spoke of the season in the past tense. A Royal wedding had drained Society's coffers early, but Wandsworth had not yet migrated to the sea-side. Mrs. Smythe had hardly any refusals. Howard was going, of course. He had given up a dinner and reception at the Speaker's, and had promised to take his friend Legge. "Mr. Legge with an 'e,'" as Amelia whispered to the mother of three unappropriated blessings, as he danced past with Gladys.

Grey lay in bed in her little room in Half-Moon Street, and wondered if she should put on her ball-dress for breakfast. The dance was to be from seven-thirty till twelve, and she was expected to go down early to be present at the birthday dinner. Septimus, who already treated Howard as one of the family, had asked him for the same hour, but he could not spare the time. He was cramming for the Foreign Office exam., and the butterflies swallowed up all his leisure. He was very busy, but not so busy that he sometimes found it shorter to make a slight *détour* by Piccadilly in going from his rooms in Victoria Street to the Museum. Hardly a day had passed since they first met when he had not by some means contrived to see Grey. The luncheon party at the "Wellington" had been but the forerunner of constant invitations to concerts, matinees or the Exhibitions, in which, sometimes, the whole of the Robinson-Smythes were included. Howard could never forget what he owed to them for introducing him to the girl who had suddenly brightened a dark life. Afterwards when she went up to Town he had his reward. A sense of gratitude and duty marred none of their subsequent meetings when Janet was *chaperon*. He liked her from the first. She won his heart on her own merits, not only by reason of her love for Grey. He found that three is not such a bad number when the intruder is working for the same end as one's self. As soon as they set foot in a picture gallery Janet apparently forgot everything else but her art. It was only after discovering her asleep once or twice on a hard leather sofa opposite a wall covered with architectural designs that Howard's conscience pricked him, and he realised that an infatuated student must have youth on his side to be able to crane his neck in impossible positions for several hours at a stretch.

Howard had not told Grey that he loved her. It seemed superfluous. Only acquaintances waste breath in talking of the weather, "that nadir and scoff of conversation." The patent fact that the sky is blue or overcast any one can see for himself. He and Grey had nothing tangible to work on, yet they knew that they were the world to each other. No terms of endearment had passed between them, no caresses; only once had Howard pressed her hand in his, and that in a moment of forgetfulness. There must be nothing to bind her to him. A woman in ways, she was a child in years and experience. Fate might spin out for her a better fortune than she would have as his wife. Her feeling for him might be a passing fancy, and he would not have her hampered. She must be free. On days that Fitz came up from Sandhurst Howard was always terribly busy. He was sure enough of himself. He was no believer in first love. Like many things it must be a matter of evolution. There had been several incidents in his life which Mallock would have likened to first attempts on the fiddle—of these, his marriage savoured least of the amateur, but it was only now that "the magic and the music" seemed to answer to his touch. And Grey's life was just one long dream from which there was no awakening. Youth cannot believe what a short time dreams really last. It has been estimated that the whole of the *Pilgrim's Progress* passed through Bunyan's brain in some fractions of a minute, but the atmosphere of his gaol was never the same after. Some of us can reason even in sleep "This is not real." Grey was just conscious enough to know that if the time came when she awoke she would be better, not the worse for those halcyon days. Their relations were as perfect as may be between the unwedded. No stratum of explanation had to be penetrated, each seemed to divine

instinctively what was in the other's mind. Grey was sometimes quite startled in putting a question to him, for his answer would flash through her own mind word for word before he had time to speak. A wireless telegraphy existed between them upon which they looked as quite a commonplace state of affairs. It is, after all, only a phenomenon to the ignorant, not to those who understand.

Grey stretched herself, and wondered if Burton would ever call her. She knew well enough that a morning in bed would have done her all the good in the world. She had lost nearly a stone in weight the last few weeks, and all the Lancaster roses had faded from her cheeks, but she could not rest. The days were short. There would be time enough to make up arrears of sleep when she went home, and she could lead a dormouse existence all the winter if so minded. The moment Burton appeared with her bath-water and letters she sprang out of bed and went over to the window. Not much to be seen at that hour. A crawling hansom, a baker's boy on a motor-cycle and some sparrows enjoying a dust bath. Half-Moon Street, after all, stood more or less in the wings, but the deafening roar of Piccadilly which reached her through the open window told her that the curtain was up on another day's melodrama. Her interest in the post had somewhat abated since her arrival in Town. If Howard had occasion to write he usually sent the letter by special messenger. Firenze's were the only others for which she really cared. There was one from her that morning. She could see it on the dressing-table from her post behind the window curtain. There was no mistaking the handwriting. Firenze wrote with a quill; the result was something between a prescription and a page out of the Koran. Grey left hold of the curtain,

and went over to the dressing-table. Underneath Firenze's letter was one with the "Junior" crest. The other must wait.

"MY DEAR MISS ALISON,—Some flowers ought to arrive for you about noon. I suppose you will wear white to-night.—Yours very sincerely,

"CHARLES HOWARD."

The other was not much longer, but more of a surprise:—

"DEAREST GREY,—After all, we have come back sooner than we intended. I scribble this in the train coming up from Dover. If you can read it, come as early as you can to the 'Berkeley' to-morrow. I want you very badly.—Your loving

"FIRENZE."

Grey rang for Burton and sent the letter in to Janet. She sang all the time she was dressing, and ate hardly any breakfast.

"It's not much good going before eleven. She will be tired after the crossing. Shall we go and ask about Hereward's present first?"

"Yes, and then I could go on to the National Gallery, if you don't mind."

"And you will come and see Firenze after, if you have time. It is not a students' day, is it?"

"No, but I wanted to have a good look at that Raphael."

"Very well, dear, then we will be independent, and I will come back in good time to drive to Victoria."

Firenze's face was more to Janet than all the Madonnas in the world, but she could not bring herself to intrude upon the sisters in their first *tête-à-tête*.

Grey was shown into a sitting-room over-looking Devonshire House. The waiter knocked at the folding-doors, which a smart French maid opened. Beyond her, in front of a cheval-glass, was Firenze.

"Is that my mouse? I can't move for a minute, darling. '*Ernestine, ôtez ceci et apportez une chaise pour Mademoiselle.*'" She sat with one hand soaking in a bowl of scented water. A box of silver manicure implements stood upon the dressing-table.

"Oh! I don't want a chair. Let me sit on the floor, as usual."

She sank down at her sister's feet and put up her face to be kissed.

Firenze flung one arm round her.

"Oh! I have wanted you, Grey. No one knows how much. Ted is a darling, but I can't get on long without a woman. I never could."

"Where is he?"

"At Tattersall's. You are looking very pretty, but so thin. Are you well?"

"Better than I have ever been in my life. And you?"

"I have been ill. I had a nasty touch of malaria at Naples, that was why I could not write for a week or two."

Grey turned away her head to hide her burning cheeks. She had never even noticed any break.

"But you are all right now? You look splendid."

"Oh, yes! I'm nearly as well as ever. I get a bit tired, that's all. As for my looks, Ernestine is responsible for them. She dresses hair divinely. Let her do yours."

"Burton would be offended or else I would."

"Oh! Burton is up, is she? and the dear old Vestal? Come into the other room, and we will talk till lunch time."

For two hours their tongues never stopped. No one disturbed them. At twelve Ernestine came in noiselessly with Mariani wine and biscuits, that was all.

Firenze was as usual the greater chatterbox. She had a larger income to draw upon. Grey gave her little all, but when it dwindled down to the uttermost farthing would not touch her capital. She mentioned Howard *en passant*. He came so much into her life that it was impossible to leave him out; but she could not bring herself to tell even Firenze the great thing that had come about since they last met. She felt mean to accept so much and give so little. Firenze, she was sure, had kept nothing from her. She was just the same, only, if possible, more winsome, more beautiful. In time Grey trusted that she would not be so foolishly reticent, but just then the new-born happiness seemed too sacred for human ear. "*Secret de deux secret de dieux*"; for a time let it remain so.

A dainty luncheon was served in the sitting-room. Grey ate heartily.

"Don't be shocked if I go nap on the *menu*. I was so excited at getting your letter that I couldn't eat my breakfast."

"How dear of you! Always be fond of me, Grey. Never desert me, promise."

"I'll promise anything you like if you give me another of those Strassburg cutlets. I believe I'd sell my birthright for a mess of these. Poor Esau! he paid dearly for his old pottage."

Firenze played with her food. A glass of Sauterne and a rissole seemed all that she could fancy. Grey noticed that she had put down her fork.

"What's the matter, old lady? Where is your vulgar Yorkshire appetite?"

"I breakfasted late."

"I know what your breakfasts are. What did you have?"

"Coffee and a roll."

"H'm! I thought so."

Grey pretended to be absorbed in a meringue. She stole a glance at Firenze and noticed that she was absently crumbling a piece of oatcake.

"There is something wrong," she said, looking up sharply. "You have grown suddenly silent. What is it?"

Firenze buried her head in her hands, and burst into tears.

"Tell me what it is," said Grey, jumping up and bending over her. "You know you can trust me, and you've never had a secret from me in your life."

The sobs grew louder and more piteous. They shook her slight frame from head to foot. Grey opened the folding-doors to make sure that no one was listening, then she put her strong arms round her sister and dragged her on to the sofa in the window. The sudden movement calmed her. She lay back panting. Great tears splashed down on to her knee, but the sobs gradually died away.

"Drink this," said Grey, handing her her wine-glass. She shook her head.

"No, no! not that. I'm better, I'll soon be all right."

Grey sat down by her and took her hand; the blue-veined white hand which she was not yet accustomed to see with its bright wedding-ring and keeper. They reminded her of something.

"Is it anything to do with Edward? Is there any foolish misunderstanding between you? If so, you must think nothing of it. I have so often heard that the first year or two of married life are anything but blissful."

"No. Edward is just an angel; oh! he is so good to me."

"It's not money, I suppose?"

Again a negative. Grey was puzzled. Nine-tenths of the troubles of life she imagined to be caused by money and love. She was racking her brains for another guess when Firenze began—

"I don't know how to tell you—but I have taken to drink—more than is good for me."

"Firenze!"

Grey dropped her hand in astonishment. She felt her heart thumping quickly with the shock. But Firenze was hysterical by nature. She exaggerated.

"You will help me, won't you?"

"Help you! yes, of course; but tell me more."

"It began with the malaria in Naples. It pulled me down dreadfully. The doctor ordered me port and Mariani wine between meals. I grew to like them. They picked me up and made me feel so nice and lively. Whenever I felt weak I used to take a glass, and then one day when Ted was out a demon took possession of me and made me take more."

"And when he came back?"

"I was in bed with a bad headache."

"Did he know?"

"No, no! and for Heaven's sake don't tell him."

"I should have thought that a man would detect anything of that sort much quicker than we should."

"Yes, in another woman, but hardly in his bride. I should have to be very, very bad before he noticed anything was the matter, and even then he would scarcely believe it. Why *you* hardly could, and much as you love me you don't know, you can't know what a husband's love is."

"How often has this happened?"

"Twice. That is, twice badly."

"I don't understand it. You never used to touch anything but water at home."

"No, I know; but when I went to Paris we always drank *vin ordinaire*. It was very light, but not so insipid as water. Drinking is made so easy in France. And then the absinthe. You remember the absinthe I brought back with me?"

"Absinthe?"

"That green stuff."

"Do you mean your tonic?"

"Yes, the tonic that is filling the Seine and Père la Chaise to overflowing. It was just beginning to get hold of me, but the excitement and happiness of my engagement intervened. I never even bothered to have the bottle re-filled. If it hadn't been for that horrid fever I believe that I should have been all right, but you don't know how weak it left me. I felt just as if I were fading away and sinking through the floor."

"But now you are better, darling. We will feed you up and take care of you, and you must never be allowed to get into that state again. You don't care for it, do you?"

"No, I don't care a bit for it, really; but when the dreadful craving comes upon me I can't stop. I do it with my eyes open. I know what I am bringing on myself, and yet I go on. For weeks I have been all right, and then suddenly the fiend swoops down upon me. Oh! help me; say that I shan't do it any more."

"You know that I'll help you with all my heart and soul, but you must help yourself, too, or it will be no good. You must kill this demon outright for Edward's sake, if not for your own."

"It is so strong and I am so weak."

"Nonsense. It's not stronger than you are yet, but it will be if you let it grow."

Grey paused. She had spoken slowly and emphatically to frighten Firenze. She did not heed her, but went on murmuring—

"Oh! say that I sha'n't do it again."

"What's the use of my saying so a hundred times if you won't help me. Firenze, do you quite realise how terrible all this is? Do you know that if you give way to it you will ruin your own mind and body, and wreck your husband's life."

"Yes, I do know," she said impatiently.

"And you love Edward?"

"Why, you know I do."

"Prove it then. Swear to me on your word of honour that you will never touch wine between meals. It would be better that you should never taste it at all."

"The doctor orders me to take a little. Let me do it by degrees. It is not as if I were a confirmed drunkard. No serious harm has been done yet."

Grey opened her mouth as if to speak and then shut it again. Firenze did not seem to see things in the proper light. It seemed serious enough that a young and lovely bride had twice on her wedding-tour been the worse for drink. Grey had always had a horror of drunken people amounting almost to terror. The common sight of poor besotted wretches staggering out of gin palaces in London had not lessened it; but that her own sister, with no trouble to drown, should fall under the national curse, and treat the matter so lightly, was heart-rending.

"Have you a Bible here," said Grey, "or would you prefer just to trust to your own honour without a solemn pledge."

Grey judged her by herself. To take the blue rib-

bon always struck her as the total surrender of independence and free agency. She would have despised herself as a very poor creature if she could not resist temptation without a written affidavit.

Firenze hung her head.

"I left my Bible at home. I have been too happy lately to think about religion."

Grey did not pay any attention to her answer. Her heart was sore enough as it was.

"Then you must promise *me*."

There was a pause. Firenze did not rush at the suggestion. She had risen, and seemed to be looking at a coach passing the windows. The guard played a few bars of "Buy a Broom" on his horn before she spoke.

"Yes, I do promise."

"That's right, darling."

Grey went up to her and kissed her. There was not much of the sacrament about the lightly-spoken answer, but she knew that even in moments of great solemnity Firenze never made any outward show of it. She was satisfied.

"And now let's talk of something else, 'Mouse.' Oh! I feel so much better for telling you. Just as if I had had a tooth out with gas."

Grey wished that she had spoken less flippantly. It seemed to her that she had suffered the most of the two.

Suddenly Firenze gave a little cry of pleasure.

"There's Edward, look, crossing over from Walsingham House. I wonder if he will take us out shopping? I can't bear going out alone, can you?"

"I can't bear shopping with a man. They always want you to buy the first thing you see. I hate doing that even when it's what I want. No, they ought to be chained outside like the dogs at the Stores."

"Poor money-spinners. You are just too late, Teddy. Your sister-in-law has been holding forth on the subject of men. She says ——"

"No, I didn't," said Grey laughing. She knew Firenze's powers of embroidering of old.

"Well, Grey! I've brought her safely back to you, you see. How smart you are, child. I always picture you in 'Harris' tweed."

"I think that I have forgotten the smell of 'Harris' tweed."

"I hope that you haven't forgotten how to ride. I've just bought a young bay that wants licking into shape before the cub-hunting. Are you going down on Saturday with us?"

"Oh, no! not for some time yet. And now I must be going, Firenze. I'm off to Wandsworth for the night"

"To those Smythes. You always do your duty nobly. Are they very impossible?"

"No, and they are so good to me."

"I'm certain that they're the sort of people that I should shout at. Whenever there's anything at all extraordinary about people, I don't know how it is, but I invariably imagine that they must be deaf. There was a terrible man opposite us at *table d'hôte* in Paris, with a hare-lip and a glass eye, and I always raised my voice at him until one day Ted reminded me that he could hear as well as I could."

Grey laughed heartily.

"Well, good-bye, turtle-doves. Shall I come again to-morrow when I get back?"

"We are going to spend the day with Edward's sister to-morrow; come on Friday."

"Very well. Good-bye. Take care of yourself."

"I met an old playmate of yours the other day," she

said to Beaumont as he went downstairs with her, " Mr. Howard. He was on the *Neptune*."

" So Firenze told me. Good old Charlie. He's one of the best. We must get him up for some hunting. Give him my love if you come across him again."

" I might see him to-night," were her parting words. Love is a sad perverter of the truth.

CHAPTER IX.

Explain not, let this be. This is life's height.

—BROWNING.

THE Mandeville House drawing-room had not been so naked since its birth. Stripped of all but its cosy corner, which looked more uncomfortable than ever and bore a strong likeness to a patrician weighing-machine, it would have served as an unblushing model for the "altogether."

Septimus took infinitely more pains with the arrangements for the dance than his wife. For once he pulled himself together in a supreme effort which might have saved the life of Mrs. Dombey. He had never given a dance before; but like the man who has seen an artist painting a picture, he knew how it ought to be done. The last entertainment under his hospitable roof had been a "spelling bee," but it had cost him many friends. Only one of the guests had suggested a second one; but he was a dreadful person who took parallelogram in his stride, and talked intimately of Celtic roots as if they grew in the back-garden. Ignorance likes to masquerade under an assumed name. If with a smattering of knowledge it has the contrivance to pass for its antitype it deserves to keep the title, but a "spelling bee" admits of no fencing. Each must stand on his own merits. Dancing required no intellect. This time all should enjoy themselves, and every old grievance should be wiped out. Septimus' intentions were of the best, but if the historic pavement which all help to

ferent aspect. In any case "All's well that ends well." Grey felt that she had done good work, for whether the offence had been trifling or grave she had Firenze's promise that it should not happen again. She was free to enjoy herself to the utmost. And she *did* enjoy herself. A first ball is usually rich in happy reminiscence. The picture which Firenze had drawn of a private dance to which she had been allowed to go two Christmases before had made Grey long for her time to come. Her feet had often beaten time to imaginary Strauss music as she listened to the description of the oak-panelled hall with its parquet floor and festoons of evergreens, a fitting background to the "gloss of satin and shimmer of pearls." She had often pictured her own *début* under similar circumstances—perhaps at the same house. The gatherings there were noted for pretty girls and smart men, who valed all night as hard as they rode all day. To her partners she had never given much thought. A full programme is the great achievement at eighteen. Novitiate dancers are better than a disgraceful blank. Later, one is thankful to have one's toes to one's self for a season.

This great event had come at last in her life, and the realisation bore as much resemblance to the anticipation as do most day-dreams, but with this difference: for enjoyment the former immeasurably outstripped the latter. The floor was execrable, the noise of the band deafening, the heat intense. Space was limited, and most of the men reversed—an unnecessary impediment to the highly-congested traffic. But "Robin" was there. Nothing else mattered.

They danced together as often as they dared these two, to time and tune of their own, oblivious of all else but themselves. Star actors playing up to each other, Bernhardt, Guitry and a company of foils. Never had

they been so *simpatica* as that night. Howard had warned Grey that he might be late, and she did not dance till he came. She helped Gladys to find partners for her guests, talked to those whom she knew, and promised young Tompkins and Major Brooke a polka and a "square" respectively, later on. Then she stood in a corner and waited for Howard—a queenly little figure in bridal white. He went to her as soon as he had introduced his friend Legge to Mrs. Smythe.

Grey held up her bouquet of gardenias for him to smell.

"How did you know that I loved them so?"

"That's one of the things that I can't tell you, for I don't know."

It forged another link between them. They had never talked of flowers, and so many women she knew could bear neither the stiff waxen blossoms nor the powerful scent. One would run the same risk in giving George Meredith to a stranger.

Romance did not claim everything that night. Comedy also held great sway. There were one or two things at which Grey laughed aloud afterwards when she was alone, and some people who would have made Firenze very hoarse. Cousin Septimus taking the floor was a sight not to miss. He seemed to imagine himself on ice and to have doubts as to whether it would bear him. Major Brooke, also, suddenly bethought him of a fancy dance which he had seen in Canada. It was not until the band had been ordered to play an extra for his special benefit that he remembered that he had forgotten it. It seemed to be the fashion, too, for all the girls to thank the men for dancing with them. Judging from the specimens of the nobler sex before her Grey felt that any favour conferred was undoubtedly the other way about. Certainly she considered that

some compensation was due to her for embarking on a sea of difficulties with young Mr. Tompkins in a blue brocade waistcoat and a bunch of "fobs," at the helm.

Shortly before ten she was sitting-out with Mr. Legge, close to the front door, when the bell was pulled manfully, and a stentorian voice announced—

"Car—ter——"

"Cinderella dances have their drawbacks," said Grey laughing.

"Their advantages, you mean, dear lady"—giving the aproned intruder a shilling—"What would you not give in Town sometimes for a diversion like this?"

He pointed to a brown-paper parcel.

"London Society is nothing more than a stupid flock of sheep playing 'Follow my Leader.' In a certain set unless one meets the same people night after night, saying the same things and eating the same dishes, one is considered *bourgeois*. I am more than grateful to Howard for bringing me here."

"Tell me, will he—Mr. Howard—get through his Foreign Office exam.?"

"If he really means getting through he will. Of course you understand that it is not so much a matter of competition as selection. I mean he would have to wait for a vacancy."

"I know; but he must be ready. He has got his nomination, and he is going to stop in Town all through the hot weather to work."

"Well, I only hope that he succeeds. He has a career before him. We can't afford to let men like him deteriorate into fox-hunting squires, and he doesn't wish it himself."

"No, he said the other day that he never enjoyed a day's hunting so much as now, when he occasionally takes a Saturday off and runs down to Rugby."

"No, I wish that there were more of us like him.

The great secret of his success is that whatever he does he throws himself into it with all his might for the time being. And there he is waiting for you. You might not think it from the indifferent way he lounges in that door-way, but when he puts on his *blasé* mood I always know that there's something in the wind. He would have romped into the Diplomatic Service, and exam.'s a stiff 'un, too."

"Yes, it is his dance," said Grey looking at her card as if she had not known the frequent oases by heart.

"Where shall we go?" said Howard, "shall we play clumps"—indicating a colony of hungry savages in the smoking-room—"or shall we eat? The procession is just starting."

"Oh! I'm not nearly important enough to eat yet, but I know a bank, which being interpreted means a bench under the landing-window. We can have a bird's-eye view of them from there."

They ran upstairs just in time to see Septimus and Janet cross the hall. She made a complete conquest of him before supper was over. He found her charming, intellectual and sympathetic. She confessed afterwards that she had only opened her mouth twice; first to exclaim "Really?" then to yawn covertly, but the amount of appreciation compressed into the interjection entirely veiled the inadvertent sign of boredom.

"What on earth is that foreign body with Hereward? Oh! do look, Miss Alison," as the son and heir propelled something along. "It seems to be neither flesh, fowl nor good red herring."

"Oh! I'm not so sure about the flesh. I rather think it's what he calls his boss's wife. She might be entered as any other variety."

"But not in the selling class. Ah! there go Miss Smythe and the British forces. What a pity that they

don't invent pale pills for pink people. She would be almost pretty if it were not for that complexion. Oh! and there's old Legge with our hostess. They can't get into the doorway together. He'll be given out 'leg before.'"

"You are very wicked to-night."

"I know; I can't help it."

He took her feather fan off her knee, and fidgeted with it.

"Don't break it, it is my best one."

"But I want an excuse to give you a better one. I brought a beauty from the Cape."

"You may give it me without the excuse if you are very good. I love ostrich feathers. It's always such a relief to me that it doesn't hurt the birds to rob them."

"You don't wear ospreys, I hope?"

"No, never; nor wings."

"But supposing that the ostriches did suffer, what would you do?"

"I don't know. I hope that my better feelings would assert themselves; but I never bother myself about possibilities. There are too many realities."

"Wise little woman."

"There was a good lady, at home, who confessed to lying awake one night trying to decide whether to wear grey or mauve at her daughter's wedding. That was three years ago, and the daughter's hand has not yet been sought in marriage."

"How delicious! And yet, poor woman, a comedy played seriously is often only amusing to the audience."

He took a gardenia out of her bouquet and put it in his coat.

"I saw Gilbert again to-day. He seems to think that I'm sure to get through; and, you see, besides my

languages I know the pulse of the Chinese pretty well. They are not such a puzzle if you take them the right way; but some men study their fellow-creatures as they read Browning. They knit their brows and say, 'I know I shall never understand him.'"

"You will not know the result yet, I suppose?"

"Not officially. The F.O. takes a long time to make up its mind, but, fortunately, mine was made up some time ago, which will save complications. What will you bet me that I pass?"

"I don't bet on certainties. You mean to get through, and I mean that you shall. What could the whole Cabinet do against two such powers?"

"Put it in the singular. Say 'such a power.'"

"How childish you are. Only a schoolboy, after all."

"Yes, but a terrible 'fag' master. Aren't you afraid of me, little Alison minor?"

"No. If you were to bully, I should strike; and you won't as long as I can be of any use to you, you know; so I fancy I have you hard and fast. Let us go in to supper."

It is said that our weakest spots are most easily detected by those beneath us. Maria, catching sight of the couple, beckoned them to a little serving-table behind the door. Every one else sat at the large one.

"We are moving backwards," said Howard. "Do you remember what a treat it was to sit at a side-table in the nursery days?"

"I remember that it was also a sign of disgrace. Oh!" (in an excited whisper) "do look" (as a waiter brushed past them carrying a round of beef).

Grey put down her head on the table and laughed so infectiously that Howard was obliged to take her joke on trust, and laughed too.

"Don't you see all the waiters are labelled?"

It was the host's little plan to prevent stupid mistakes, but it struck Grey that the supply of badges had run short. She could not help telling Howard so.

"Or perhaps they have got mixed."

"That looks more likely. Could you ascertain? I should quite enjoy a dance with the gentleman behind the soup-tureen, but as for the others ——"

"Champagne, miss?"

She shook her head.

"You must have some," said Howard. "The heat is awful, and you've been dancing hard."

"I'd much rather have lemonade."

"And I'd much rather you had this. A woman ought to drink a little if only for the sake of good-fellowship. It's so depressing to sit opposite any one who takes nothing but water."

He was accustomed to be obeyed. In the end, she would give in, he knew. He gave her his glass and took her empty one.

She was very tired; her throat parched; but she felt that a sip of the sparkling wine would have choked her.

"Don't waste it, please. I sha'n't touch it."

"Not even to please me?"

"No."

"You are very disobedient."

"One must establish a right of way once a year or so. Let us talk of something else."

But she was strangely silent during the rest of supper. The little incident had brought the scene at the "Berkeley" back to her with redoubled horror.

Howard noticed the sudden change, but did not allude to it. He knew when to leave a woman alone. His efforts to keep the one-sided conversation going were about as successful as the treble or bass score of a duet

played separately. He was glad when she gathered up her fan and gloves, and rose from the table. Under the hall lamp she paused, and looked at her programme. A long stretch of desert this time. Two dances running with Hereward, and then Major Brooke's.

"Wait till I learn my fate, too," said Howard, trying to decipher his own hieroglyphics. "Some person or persons unknown. Is one expected to have two partners here, I wonder? I have seen it done in the Circassian Circle amongst the Blue-jackets."

Grey's laugh was only half-hearted. Firenze's voice, "I have taken to drinking more than is good for me," rang in her ears, accompanied by three bars of "Myosotis" which Amelia played while the musicians supped. It was not until the last Lancers that she quite recovered herself, and the subsequent "I do promise" reigned in their stead.

Howard was her partner. Gladys and Legge their *vis-à-vis*. The band played invigorating Scotch airs. Septimus on the smallest provocation would have burst into a reel.

Grey handed Howard her bouquet.

"Put it very carefully on the piano, please."

"You are all right again?"

"Yes. I wasn't cross to you, was I?"

"Cross! not a bit; and if you had been, do you think that it would have made any difference? A woman, whom I used to know very well, told me once that it was such a relief to be on slanging terms with me."

Grey knew that he meant his wife. He had spoken of her impersonally because he seemed to guess that she could not bear the thought that she had not been quite first with him. She forgot to set-to-partners till he reminded her. It was a cheery set. All romped like children. Miss Simmons' hair came down. Hereward and

Tompkins paid off old football scores. Major Brooke took a wrong turn, and fell on his back.

"Hallo, Gladys! you've got a *game leg*, I see," roared Septimus, as his daughter and her partner galloped past.

The band struck up "Charlie is my Darling."

Both Howard and Grey started. With one accord they looked at each other. It was a night of little things, the little things that go to make the sum total without which we should starve.

During the remainder of the dance he held her more closely, as if by right. In the curtailed interval between the Lancers and the Galop he hardly spoke. Grey did not wish it. "Love's words are weak, but not love's silences." His looks, his whole bearing had eloquently told her that night how much he cared for her. No futile declaration was needed. When on the stroke of twelve the band played the National Anthem and they stood up side by side the thrill that passed through her was not all due to patriotism.

CHAPTER X.

Alas, what sufferings from a single cause!
 How many wrongs, how many miseries!
 What misdeeds punishable by no laws!

—OWEN MEREDITH.

FROM great joy or sorrow the same results often accrue. Grey could not sleep. There was nothing to trouble her. Night serves usually as a magnifying-glass to the minutest worries, but even Firenze's terrible avowal was reduced to the lowest possible denomination by the memory of the supreme moment of her life. It had come early to her. To some it never comes at all. Many a bride goes to the altar ignorant of the unspeakable happiness of that heaven-born fraction of a second when, independent of clumsy human words, two souls tell each other in their unicode the state secret that makes the world go round.

Grey's one regret for her lost beauty-sleep was that her looks would suffer for it. Yet, after all, it was no great matter if they did. Howard was not a man to set such great store by bright eyes and pink cheeks. Grey pitied the women who fly to the rouge-pot in desperation, rather than receive their lovers with sallow complexions. If Howard had been of the stamp to inspire such awe in her she knew that she would not have been lying awake thinking of him just then. No one seeing the immovable little figure in the bed would have suspected the state of high fever she was in. A more emotional girl would have resorted to some device

for courting the stubborn Morpheus. Remnants of school poetry, which cling like cobwebs to the roof of the brain even after Society's feather brush has attempted a thorough cleaning of childish things, are said to prove irresistible to him. The multiplication table said backwards has proved even more efficacious. It is easy to imagine that the poor distraught man would give such applicants not only slumber wholesale, but powerful narcotics rather than endure their monotonous supplications. Grey did not worry him in this way, so received no reward. A professional beggar is often given alms to stop his whining, while the deserving pauper vainly strives to make ends meet at home. For all that Grey lay so motionless her forehead and cheeks were burning. There was *eau de Cologne* in her dressing-case, but she was not certain that she wished the flames put out. Cleansing fires there are, incendiarisms, which purify more than they destroy. Of whatever vices Grey may have had she made a holocaust that night with her independence piled on top. From thenceforth her life should be a willing sacrifice to one man, and such ashes as were left worthy of a silver urn.

Every now and then she opened her eyes to look at her bouquet, which she had placed opposite the bed in a jug of water. Its scent made the atmosphere that of a death-chamber. It was one, for Grey, the child, died a painless death that night, and Grey, the woman, took her place.

It was after eight when Maria called her, and even then the house was wrapt in silence. Septimus did not sing that morning. There seemed to be a close time even for the protestant of the long-suffering Anthea. Grey gossiped with Maria for a while. She had reason to believe that there had been passages between her and the head-waiter. Happiness makes the smallest

detail of a fellow-creature's life interesting. Sorrow can barely tolerate the most eventful experience.

"I think everything went off very well, Maria, don't you?"

"Indeed, I'm shaw it did, miss. Cook will 'ave it that the dancing was bad; but then cook was always for *quadrilles* and the Dee Albert. She never couldn't abide a waltz, couldn't cook, ever since the baker's young man told her in a fit of the tantrums that she 'ad a figure like a 'cottage loaf.'"

"It was very rude of him. And what dance do you like best?"

"Me? I'm not partickler as long as I enjoy myself. I don't think, you know, that amusements in theirselves matters. The best bit of fun I ever 'ad in my life was one wet Bank 'Oliday, in Clapham Junction, when all the trains was late, and me and fourteen others sat in a third class carriage for two hours."

"I should have thought that it would have been more enjoyable if thirteen of them hadn't been there."

Two seemed the only possible number to Grey just then.

Maria's face turned the colour of the red can in her hand.

"Oh! miss, don't you see we was sitting far more familiar than we should have been in an empty compartment."

Grey remembered then the etiquette of the servants' ball-room, where, between the dances, the ladies sit on one side and the gentlemen on the other. It apparently applied to railway journeys also.

At breakfast Grey's looks received much censure from the master of the house.

"Eh! what's this?" waylaying her as she tried to creep unnoticed to her place. "From what I saw last

night your face ought to have been a mass of bloom, a sort of standard rose-tree, this morning, and instead I see these ugly black smudges."

"Only black roses, Cousin Septimus, the latest triumph of horticulture."

"You monkey. But you enjoyed yourself?"

"Oh! so much. I never enjoyed myself so much in my life."

Gladys limping into the room saved her further cross-questioning.

"Well, old lady, you look pretty fit. Come and give an account of yourself. How many times did you dance with your babbling Brooke, and has he proposed yet?"

"I'm not certain. I think that he meant to, but was not quite sure how to do it effectively. At any rate, I did not accept him, if he did. There's my programme, Pa."

"I expect that he will write," said Grey. "Often people who are utterly at a loss for a word in season produce masterpieces of eloquence on paper. It's rather unsatisfactory. Just like thinking of a well-deserved snub five minutes too late."

"Personally, I prefer the letter-writing principle," said Mrs. Smythe, "and I beg that you will not be heartless and flippant if the Major does offer, Gladys. Your father and I have a great regard for him. You might do much worse; so don't let him go without careful consideration."

"But 'Mum,' I can't keep the poor thing knocking about on 'appro.' Goods not kept are always supposed to be returned within three days, or they are charged for. Other patterns will come my way. I've nothing against Major Brooke. He would make me a nice useful husband of the linsey-woolsey type, but I should soon tire of

him. If I had to go through life with only one dress I should choose something a little more becoming. Not anything too smart, of course, but surely there must be a compromise between dingy home-spun and satin *merveilleux*."

"There's Royal Navy Serge," said Grey at random. "You can do what you like with it and it never spoils or wears out."

"Oh! we all know your choice," said Gladys. "That doesn't count; you're prejudiced, and besides, what good would it do me when you've taken possession of the whole bale for yourself?"

Grey flushed scarlet, then laughed. The whole discourse struck her as being unique. Fitful scraps of sleepy conversation she had imagined to be *de rigueur* after a ball; yet she might have known that at Mandeville House things would be different. Hereward was the next member of the family to appear. They were added to the breakfast-table by slow degrees like the ingredients of *mayonnaise* sauce. A derisive jeer greeted the hero of the hour.

"Let me introduce Hereward the Wake," said Septimus, "he has not been a-*wake* very long."

Janet came in a minute later more tired by the unusual excitement of a dance than she had been for an age, but fresh, good-tempered, talkative and quite willing for everything to happen over again that night. Every face brightened when she entered. Septimus and Hereward almost quarrelled as to where she should sit. Amelia still blinking behind the tea-cosy rose unnecessarily to take her her cup. Janet had not thought of herself for fifteen years. Therein lay the secret of her success. All things to all men she might be, but that was of no consequence so long as the men did not meet.

"Before you came Hereward used to fight to sit by me," said Grey. "He thought that I was the nicest girl he had ever met, didn't you?"

"Yes, but unfortunately somebody else thought so too. A man never poaches another's preserves knowingly."

Grey was too happy to resent the exposure of her private affairs in a public pillory. Before she left there was another incident which would have vexed her intensely had her future been more uncertain.

Septimus had cake and cherry-brandy brought into the drawing-room at noon. In vain the travellers protested that they seemed just to have breakfasted.

"Nonsense. You must take some. We always speed our guests with this; and besides there is a toast I want us all to drink. First, absent friends, coupled with the name of Charles Howard."

Grey in her agitation emptied her liqueur glass at one gulp.

"And now, one more. The lucky woman who shall be his wife."

She held out her glass to be re-filled.

"No, not this time, my dear. We don't drink our own health."

She stood with downcast eyes, twisting the stem of her glass nervously between her finger and thumb. The buzz of voices repeating the toast changed to her name, then cheers. In the midst of the hubbub Maria tried to announce the cab. A sudden thought flashed into Grey's mind. It was a case of "now or never." She was always too timid to take the initiative in matters like the present; but since last night everything seemed different from what it had ever been before. Miss Simmons was already saying "good-bye."

"Wait one moment, Janet. She seized the decanter

from Hereward, and lifting her half-filled glass high in the air looked at Septimus with glistening eyes—

"To the man who first brought them together."

Less than an hour later they were driving towards Piccadilly.

"If I were a nice unselfish woman," said Grey, "I would take my bouquet to the 'Berkeley,' that Firenze might find it when she came back to-night. The gardenias are wonderfully fresh, and she loves flowers."

"She loves roses best," said Janet, one of whose charms was always to argue with people as they wished to be argued with. "You could buy her a lovely fresh bunch for a couple of shillings from your old woman. Some of these are beginning to turn brown. I never see a gardenia without likening it to a woman. When she is pure there is no more beautiful thing on earth, but the least speck makes her and the flower equally loathsome. They say that men make their own laws, and allow themselves a longer tether than us in consequence; but I can't help thinking that they're right. You would cling to a withered dog-rose days after you had flung away your gardenia."

"Yes, you would. Personally, I intend to keep mine until they're like bits of brown paper, but they're rather different, aren't they?"

"Of course."

"And you won't think me an abnormal monster if I keep them all to myself in my own room?"

"Under the circumstances I should think you far more abnormal if you didn't."

"Oh! what an angel you are. But, of course, you understand that there's nothing in it. Really. I'm not joking. We are great friends, but not a word has been said. Like the sample of seedlings we bought in Oakby

market, it might come to something and it very easily might not. There is no guarantee. It's touch and go. 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip,' and sometimes the cup's not even filled, and it's no use attempting to drink."

"And sometimes also you have the trouble of filling it and some one else calmly takes it out of your hand. I daresay it's only like turning an incompetent slavey into a trained housemaid. As soon as she knows her work she asks a higher wage and goes elsewhere, and all your trouble benefits a stranger."

Janet sighed. Her thoughts were again with her ascetic parson. She had been the first to teach him the blessing of feminine companionship. She had reclaimed and tilled the fallow soil, and a woman with blue goggles and a club foot had reaped the harvest.

"But we must not get morbid, Janet. You would have absolutely wasted on your beloved parson. Something will turn up for you some day. Young Mr. Tompkins is not the only person who can do conjuring tricks. He can bring omelettes out of Cousin Septimus' yachting cap; but I back myself to get you a husband out of a couple of interviews and a week-end visit. You would have to be my accomplice, of course."

"No, thank you, child. The laugh goes against the accomplice on these occasions. A woman of my age would look just as foolish with a husband as the respectable old gentleman with sovereigns in his nose. All I want is to sit quietly in the audience and watch you. Give me a good seat in the middle, not to one side. I cherish my illusions, and can't bear to see the prompter and the make-up."

"There are none to see in our little duologue. We have neither of us studied a line of our parts, but instinct seems to tell us what to say. I expect that we talk about

as much nonsense as children do in their impromptu Christmas entertainments. How the poor grown-ups can sit through them and applaud I never can imagine."

"I can. You see they have gone through it all themselves in their day. It makes such a difference."

"I suppose it does, but I must say I have always failed to see anything particularly amusing in the fact of a common or garden boy in his ordinary clothes and a wooden crown announce that he is the 'King of Hearts.' It's only a variation of the ostrich theory. You cover your head and forget that you have darns in both your modern knees for all the world to see."

"But if somebody in the room can forget these prosaic evidences of wear and tear, then the play is not in vain."

"Oh! if ever anybody could make a silk purse out of a sow's ear it would be you. You are as refreshing as a cold bath."

"No; I don't think that's a good simile. A cold bath does not agree with everybody."

"A hot one, then."

"Yes, and as dangerous. Talking to you is rather like enjoying a hot bath. You feel that you are dawdling, but you haven't the strength of mind to get out of it and dress."

"And they are bad for the heart, too. But if ever you say that talking to me is bad for your heart, I'll ——"

"I never, never will. There is not much the matter with my heart at present; but if ever there is, a lady doctor will do me more good than a man."

At the corner of Half-Moon Street Grey caught sight of the old flower-woman, and stopped the cab. Janet remained where she was with the precious bouquet on her knee, feeling much like an amateur god-mother at an unrehearsed christening.

Grey got out, and bought glorious roses and mignonette for Firenze ; and thrust a large bunch of pink sweet-peas and love-in-a-mist through the window for Janet.

"There. There's sweet-peas, that's for departure. I sha'n't be long, but if anybody should call, keep them, and tell them ——"

"Tell them they have your heart, dear. And what about baby?" glancing down at her burden.

"Oh! give baby to Burton. There's a water-bottle in my room. It can have that."

"Poor thing! How nasty it sounds."

"Nonsense. Have you never heard of the water-babies? You would never throw them bread and milk in their river-bed. They are amphibious animals."

Grey wondered as she walked to the "Berkeley" if it could produce anything artistic in the way of flower-vases. If not, she would ask for a plain tumbler and a soup-plate. At the bureau she learnt that Mr. Alison-Beaumont had gone alone into the country. The Manageress believed that Mrs. Beaumont was ill. Grey was doubly glad that she had called. There could be nothing serious the matter with her or Edward would not have left her; but she would welcome her and the flowers she knew.

The sitting-room was empty. Grey listened at the bedroom door. There was perfect silence within. She gently turned the handle and went in. Ernestine lolled in an arm-chair fast asleep. Firenze was in bed, and seemed to be asleep, too. Grey crossed the room on tip-toe, and stood watching her. She lay with her back to the light and her face hidden by her beautiful hair. One arm was flung carelessly across the pillow, almost as white as the nainsook sleeve of her night-dress. If she had been in pain it was forgotten then. Grey, to whom reaction had brought aching eyes, envied her uncon-

sciousness. She sat down at the side of the bed, and laid her cheek on the counterpane. The scent of the roses was the first thing that roused her. They must be thirsty, poor things. She always looked upon flowers as living things; would never gather one of two. Loneliness was the heaviest cross of life. She would put the roses into a jug so that Firenze's eyes might rest on them when she awoke. Just then a low moan was heard. Firenze muttered a few words, and turned over quickly on to her right side. The maid began to snore loudly. If it had not been for the fear of disturbing her mistress Grey would have sent her out of the room. Firenze began suddenly to toss from side to side. Even if she were not fully awake her sleep could not be doing her much good. Grey rose, and went to the head of the bed. She bent over her sister to see if her eyes were open, then started suddenly back. She smelt strong of spirits. For the first time the memory of yesterday came to her; with it a suspicion of what might be the cause of Firenze's sudden indisposition. Then she hated herself for the very thought. It was not possible. She herself occasionally took a drop of brandy for a sick headache. Firenze had always been subject to acute neuralgia whenever over-tired. Grey could not make peace with herself for her cruel injustice. She had Firenze's promise, and that had nothing to do with medicinal treatment, nor even wine at meals; but only the injurious habit of tipping between times. Yet Firenze had greatly changed within the last twenty-four hours. Her hair had fallen back from her face, which Grey noted was flushed and puffy, and that several red pimples had appeared at the corners of her mouth. She could not any longer remain in suspense, and called her softly by her name. When she opened her eyes they were bloodshot and watery.

"You are ill ; can I get you anything ?"

She expected an incoherent answer, such as any one might give on being suddenly awakened.

"Yes, get me a little drop of brandy. I feel so weak. Ring for it in the next room."

Her head seemed clear enough. If it had not been for the sickening smell of alcohol Grey would have ignored the blotched complexion and hastened to obey her.

"Have tea instead. You have had some brandy already, haven't you ?"

"No, not yet ; but I must have some. I feel so bad. You have no idea how bad."

"But I can smell it quite strong. You must have had some before you went to sleep and forgotten."

"No, I haven't, not a drop, but ——"

A hiccough prevented her from finishing the sentence, and murmuring "My head! my head!" she fell back on the pillow.

There was no longer a loophole for doubt. The roses fell from Grey's hands to the floor. She stood there paralysed for the moment in mind and body, powerless at first to realise the evidence of her senses. Then she pulled herself together, and forced herself to think what was to be done. It was out of the question to talk or reason with Firenze in her present state. She turned her attention to Ernestine, who still slept soundly with her mouth open. Grey shook her by the shoulders. She, too, smelt of brandy. She could not think that Firenze would lower herself to drink with an inferior. There are grades of debasement. The three-bottle man under the table at a "wine" is by no means a sight to be commended, but catch him slinking into a tavern with his grooms, and there is no epithet too strong to express his degradation.

Ernestine must not be condemned unheard. She might only have finished what Firenze had put in her way. Vice spreads like wild-fire. Often the innocent suffer more than he who carelessly flings aside the lighted match. The girl started to her feet in confusion when she saw Grey standing over her.

"Have you rang, mees?"

Grey ignored the question.

"I will look after Mrs. Beaumont. You can go upstairs."

Ernestine hurried away, thankful to escape.

Acting on a sudden impulse Grey followed her into the sitting-room.

"How long has your mistress been ill?"

"It was this morning, since *déjeuner*. She was going in the train with monsieur, and then she could not go. She did try. She told me if I get her a leetle drop of brandy she would go. I did."

"How much did you get her?"

"She told me a bottle and a wine-glass. The *garçon*, he un-corkscrewed the bottle, and I pour out a wine-glass for madame."

"And what did you do with the bottle?"

She pointed to the chiffonnier.

"I put him there."

"And did madame ask for more?"

"But no. She did not ask me, but she sent me for her boots, and—and ——"

"And when you came back she had taken more?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. When I am returned she was back in the bed, and the bottle was not to see."

"And then?"

"I tell monsieur that madame could not make the voyage, that she had *mal à la tête*."

"And he went alone?"

"Yes; and he will not be of return till ever so late, and madame was ill, very ill. When I put her sings in order I did find the bottle with her skirts, and it was half empty."

"And you had some, too?"

She hung her head.

"Yes, mademoiselle. Just to try. Madame sleeps ever since, and I sink I sleep too. I am sorry."

She was very young, and seemed genuinely distressed. Grey deemed it best to deal with her as a child.

"Yes, you were fast asleep when I came in. I might have come to rob your mistress, or to murder her, and you would not have heard."

"Oh! *mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* and I love her so."

"Then you will help me to make her well?"

"Of all my heart."

"How long have you been with her?"

"Five weeks."

"And have you ever given her brandy before?"

"Once. She was ill. She said she would die if she did not have it. She wept."

"You must promise me never to give it to her again. Never. If she is to have it monsieur will give it her, but he will not. It is poison; do you understand, poison? In time it would kill her. You would not like to kill her?"

Ernestine burst into tears.

Grey wondered if she had said too much. She herself was trembling from head to foot. Her voice sounded far away.

"Come, come. There is nothing to cry for. I know that you are a good girl, and you are very young. How old are you?"

"Eighteen, mademoiselle."

"My age."

After a pause—"You have a *fiancé*, perhaps?"

Ernestine took a gold locket out of the folds of her dress, and showed Grey the photograph of a young man in uniform.

"Oh! what a nice face! what a good face! If I am not mistaken he would be very grieved if he thought that you ——"

"Oh! you will not tell him, mademoiselle. Oh! for the love of Jesus, promise me."

She forgot in her terror that Grey was ignorant of both his name and address. Grey remembered, but she knew that love is stronger than reason, and that the old ruse of pointing an unloaded carbine would here produce deadly effect.

"No, not this time."

Ernestine fell on her knees, and pressed one of Grey's hands to her lips.

"Oh! may the Holy Virgin bless and keep you, mademoiselle. I will work the fingers to the bones for you."

"Thank you, Ernestine. I shall want your help, I know. You will, of course, never mention this to any one, not even to *him*. It is our first secret. Now go and get your tea, and I will ring if I want you."

"Yes, mademoiselle. The bell attaches himself to a cord in my room. Will I ask the *garçon* to fetch your tea too?"

"No. I don't want any."

She went wearily back into the bedroom, and took up her former position at the bedside. Firenze was sleeping peacefully. Many a Society woman coming in from the broiling heat outside would have envied her lying there in the cool room surrounded by every luxury. Not the most worldly-wise would have suspected that she was in a state of drunken stupor. A child's sound, dreamless slumber would have seemed nearer the mark.

The whole truth was only just beginning to dawn upon Grey. Yesterday's incident, sufficiently terrible to spoil her evening's enjoyment for a time, had been mere child's play to this. One is ever apt to take second-hand experience with a grain of salt. Blood-curdling ghost stories may reduce undressing-time to a minimum, yet no man believes them till he has received proof positive of the existence of a spirit-world. Some of us are, of course, more credulous than others, willing to mould our lives from hearsay, but it was not so with Grey. Rumours, appearances, with her never counted for anything. For the solution of any trouble she would go straight to the fountain-head for the truth. If it had so happened that an audience of her Sovereign was necessary for the confirmation of some trifle one might rest assured that she would not be deterred by a galaxy of courtiers, but would be found in the Royal Presence sooner or later. The same answer might have been conveyed to her by responsible officials, but she had no faith in deputies. They played often a dangerous game of Russian scandal, hazarding a guess at the words said, then passing their version on to some one else's shoulders. It was not always easy to get down to the root of a matter, but rather trouble and inconvenience a thousand-fold than the unnecessary loss of a friend. To such natures, so strangely sceptical of evil in others, the fall of idols and disrobing of illusions bring untold pain.

Once, years before, in spelling out a paragraph in *The Times*, Grey had learnt that a policeman had been sent to prison for theft. There was also a terrible scandal about a clergyman. At the time, newspapers were forbidden fruit to her. The bitter taste brought due punishment. Sin existed, she knew, but certain persons she imagined to be above reproach, above all the clergy and constabulary. And one's own people, of

course, could always be counted amongst those who do no great wrong.

Things had never seemed quite the same since that memorable day. By slow but sure degrees it dawned upon her that the world was not quite what she had pictured it. Up to then it had seemed such a beautiful place, with a vast amount of surplus love and generosity and good-will flying about. The very air seemed filled with them. She often felt that she had only to stretch out her hand to catch as much as she could hold without effort. Her eyes had been opened lately. Contact with other girls less fortunate than herself had shown her that the atmosphere surrounding the world of an heiress is always charged with good things, while that of the obscure and impecunious remains vapid and colourless. She was beginning to see more and more that little is done for love, pure and simple; that nothing can be had in life without paying for it. Somebody must give the price, not necessarily one's self.

The downfall of those set in authority and the utter selfishness of the generality of her fellow-creatures had each in turn been a very bitter pill for Grey to swallow, but the events of the last few hours had shaken the foundations of her belief to their very depths. It was Firenze's untruthfulness that hurt her most. The craving for drink was doubtless a demon with which a weak woman could hardly cope since it mastered strong men, but the solemn promise broken almost as soon as it was made rankled terribly.

No one would be more penitent, she knew, than poor Firenze when she came to herself. Still the fact remained that she had given her word of honour on a certain matter, of her own free will; and a woman's word of honour was to Grey as solemn a matter as her Confirmation or taking the Holy Communion. Other

crosses she could have borne. Sudden poverty or ill-health. Both would have been bearable, but there seemed no way of lightening the dead weight which had just been laid on her young shoulders.

Everything seemed to be slipping from her. The beautiful sand castle, which she had imagined to be beyond the reach of the waves, had suddenly been surrounded by the sea. Only a little island was left for foothold. Another such breaker as the last and that, too, would be swamped. If the tide turned, then she was safe. If the tide turned! Printed tables foretell high and low water but not the exact moment when it turns, and on that all one's world may hang. Howard alone remained to her. She was as sure of him as she could be of anything in life. He would never change of his own free will, but what if the currents of reason and circumstance were too strong for him. She believed his undeclared love to be capable of any sacrifice. The study of whatever was best for her he would make his life-work.

Possessed with a mistaken idea that he was not worthy of her he would, without hesitation, have stood aside and allowed another man to pass him in the race.

The chances of such a contingency were fortunately remote. Howard's worldly qualifications would bear as searching a catechism as his life, but the mere thought of losing him terrified her. She jumped up and began to pace the room. The sudden movement disturbed Firenze.

"Is that you, Grey? Pull up the blinds, and come and talk to me."

She was perfectly wide awake and, to all appearances, quite herself again.

"You are better?"

"Ever so much. My head aches a good deal still, but that is my own fault, I suppose."

"I will bathe it."

"Do."

To be waited on hand and foot whether in good or ill health, that was what she loved. Grey was only too glad to minister to her wants, though she wished that the circumstances had been different.

"I have been an awful beast, haven't I, Mouse?" as Grey soaked a handkerchief in toilet vinegar and pressed it to her forehead, "but I am better now, and I will keep better."

"So you said yesterday, and you broke your promise. That was what hurt me most."

"Oh! that's part of the disease. When the thirst is on me I am a mad woman and hardly accountable for my actions. It's as easy for me to lie then as it is for you to speak the truth."

"But it was not on you yesterday when you told me. You were as sane as I was then."

"Yes, I was all right till this morning."

"Then I should have thought that your oath would have helped you. It was an oath, you know. You couldn't have forgotten it so soon."

"No, I hadn't forgotten it; but I'm afraid that I didn't pay any attention to it. In times like those one doesn't heed anything of that sort."

"Then what's the good of anything of that sort? An oath is meant for a talisman in times of danger. When it's all plain sailing we don't want it. I hoped that it would help you to fight when the time came."

"Fight! Fancy me fighting. You don't know the power of the thing. You always say that the stronger will must win according to all the laws of science. You know you do."

"Yes; but first it has to be proved which is the stronger. There would not be much backbone in the nation if every soldier went out to battle saying, 'I know we shall be beaten, we're so much weaker.' Determination is what you want. By that alone England has won victories with a handful of men against the enemy's hundreds. Oh! do try with all your might, and you know that I will help you to stamp out this awful plague-spot before it infects your whole life. It is not hereditary, thank Heaven! You are not fettered with a heavy chain of some one else's forging."

"I'm going to, I tell you. You needn't be so tragic over it. Really, to hear you talk, I might be a down-trodden creature in a battered crape bonnet with a branch of grog-blossoms on my nose. I know that I've been a loathsome, weak-minded creature; but I'm very sorry for it, and I'm going to make a fresh start. Say you believe me!"

"It's hard to know what to believe. A man who has just eaten a good dinner does not relish the sight of food."

"You are rather a wet-blanket, I must say; you don't help me much."

"Oh! forgive me. I'm not really unsympathetic, but the whole thing has depressed me so terribly that I don't seem as if I could get my spirits back all at once."

"And it's all my fault! I'm spoiling your life and Ted's too, and oh! I'm a miserable woman! I wish I were dead!"

She turned away her face, and began to cry.

"Nonsense. You've been very foolish, but now you're going to be all right and be as happy as the day is long. Now don't cry or you will look hideous when Ted comes back. Beautiful women in tears exist only

in fiction. Let him find you pretty and cheerful. What time is he coming?"

"About ten. You won't leave me till he comes?"

"No, of course not."

"Then I think I'll get up soon."

She pulled out her watch from under the pillow.

"A quarter to five. Let us have tea, and then we'll have a nice long evening till dinner."

"Yes, that will be splendid. I'll order tea, and may I send Ernestine with a message to Simmie?"

She went into the sitting-room to write her note. The pencilled scrawls, indicative of hot haste, are often more pondered over than the pen and ink samples sent to graphologists. Grey wasted much paper over her failures. There was nothing the matter with any of them, each was lucid and to the point, but, like Beau Brummel's immaculate white ties, they did not give satisfaction.

"DEAREST J.,—Please make your own plans for to-night. Shall not be back to dinner.—G——"

No, that would not do. It suggested indifference as to what happened at Half-Moon Street, and pleasure on her part. A possible theatre or restaurant lurked between the lines.

"DEAREST J.,—Firenze wants me to dine here, so be quite independent of me.—GREY.

"P.S.—If anybody should call I'm afraid I shall not be back till half-past ten."

That, too, went into the waste-paper basket. Janet would read it aloud, and she would certainly find Howard waiting for her whatever time she returned. On second thoughts she did not wish to see him that night. She had never had anything to conceal from him before, and he would at once detect that something was wrong.

What she wished to convey was that she was sorry not to see him and was not staying away from any motive of enjoyment.

"DEAREST J.,—Firenze is not very well, and I do not like to leave her as Edward does not come back till late. I am very tired after last night, so if anybody should happen to call please send them away. Burton need not sit up. I have my key.—G. A."

That must be final. No man could mistake her meaning. It was evident that she did not wish to see him. She wondered how it would strike him. Two readings were possible. Either she valued a good night's rest more than his society, or something had happened to blunt the keen edge of her feelings since they parted.

The waiter brought the tea, and stood waiting for the note. She gave it him and trusted for the best.

Half-past five struck as she carried the tray into the bedroom, and the clock was fast. What a long day it had been. She would have given much for a walk in the Park or, indeed, anywhere in the open air. Her brain was stifled, over-crowded with unwholesome data which she had neither the time nor the strength to house properly. Firenze, on the other hand, seemed perfectly content. Each moment her spirits rose, and such was her undoubted power over Grey that before long the cloud between them had dwindled down to the size of a dwarf's hand. When her sister was her sweet, natural self, Grey asked nothing better than to be with her to look at her.

She was worth looking at in a pink Parisian tea-gown and her hair coiled on the nape of her neck with the simplicity which requires more art than all the curls and puffs imaginable. "An innocent *ingénue*," many a man would have dubbed her, and Grey forgot to marvel

at the strength of weak woman, who may seemingly drink enough at a sitting to stupefy most men and yet be clear-headed and lively when occasion demanded.

Firenze was very talkative. She seemed entirely absorbed in her own affairs, for which Grey was partly thankful. It would have seemed profanation to mention Howard's name, as incongruous as reading a chapter out of the Bible at a regimental dinner. She could, perhaps, have wished that her sister had not been quite so self-centred, but things were better as they were. Good resolutions for the future composed the greater part of the conversation, followed by a few tears of regret for the past, then, later, that light gossip as refreshing as a water-ice which she made her speciality.

The sound of their laughter reached Beaumont before he was up the first flight of stairs.

"I needn't ask if you are better, old lady? Headache quite gone?"

"Very nearly."

"That's right. Minnie was very disappointed not to see you, but I think that we could persuade her to come north with us on Saturday, if you liked?"

"Of course I should like. She won't mind it being a bit picnicky, or object to *déjeuner* literally *à la fourchette*. All the silver's at the Bank. She's not the sort of woman who notices if the table-napkins don't match the cloth?"

"Rather not. Minnie's one of those women who go through the world in blinkers as far as unpleasant sights are concerned and wears them more for pleasure than safety. Like many short-sighted women she sees more with her wits than most do with their eyes, yet can be stone-blind when convenient."

"Oh, I know; the sort of woman who remembers your twopenny-halfpenny kindnesses and forgets that

she has overheard you abusing her clothes. Wire to her at once. Say, 'Delighted you are coming. Go Scotchman, ten o'clock, Saturday. Don't bother about clothes.'"

"No. I'm hanged if I'll send such a shilling shocker. I'll put 'Meet us ten o'clock Saturday, without fail.'"

"Oh! you must put something more than that. There is no pleasure, welcome, nor anything nice in that."

"You can't put pleasure into a telegram. They're meant for the necessities of life, not even for punctuation, thank goodness! 'Passengers are requested not to put heavy luggage in the rack' sort of idea."

"But Firenze's telegrams are always like amateur novels, full of unnecessary adjectives. That is, when she hasn't to pay for them herself. It is on record that she wired from Paris—"Send favourite white muslin with little flounces. Deliciously hot here.' And all this Epic of Hades carriage forward, if I remember rightly."

"Grey, you lie in your throat. Go and fetch the unicode out of my bag."

"Dear children, you can't wire to-night."

"But it can go early in the morning. Give it to me, Grey, it's not a book for the young. I once knew a respectable spinster compromised for life by the omission of one vowel."

"Oh! I'll write the necessary instructions without the code—'Prayers at nine. Post leaves at five. Loan of fashion-paper by courtesy of butler every Friday. Hot and cold cyclists pass the gates. Has been called the Yorkshire Garden of Eden. Serpentine paths. Madam, will you walk and talk with me?'"

"An excellent terse style. It does not, perhaps, convey our invitation to the lady very clearly, but obscurity, of course, does not matter when the style is good. How did you acquire it?"

"From the Classics. I put aside my work for some years and became engaged to a Post-Office clerk with a Grecian nose. Now, I'm going. Good-night, both of you."

"Oh! I want you to ride in the Row with me at eight to-morrow, and try the new bay. That is, if you won't be too tired?"

"Too tired to ride! There's nothing that rests me so much. It will give me great pleasure to give your horse a sore back."

"And come back to breakfast, Grey. When Ted's in a horsey mood he can't even speak the Queen's English. Come and interpret."

"All right. May the gentleman with the punctured shirt-front whistle a hansom for me?"

She made her exit with a smile. Not altogether a stage-smile to be thrown aside almost before she was out of sight of her audience. She wore it until she reached her lodgings. Like the search-light of a lighthouse Firenze had suddenly turned her best side full on her. Permeated by its dazzle she forgot the darkness which had come before. Two hours ago, she had been in the depths of despair. Now, she grovelled at Firenze's feet bound fast by the careless caresses of deed and speech which cost nothing in the giving. A dog forgets his beating when the same hand gently pats his head. Grey remembered only that she had the sweetest sister in the world.

Janet was sitting up for her.

"Child, how tired you look. Talk to me for a minute and then go to bed. How is poor Firenze, and what is the matter with her?"

"She's much better now. She's rather like an opera-hat, I think, flat in the day-time and springs up to her full significance at night; but she never was very robust."

"No, poor child. She takes after her mother."

Grey was thankful to turn the conversation into another channel.

"I always forget that you knew her mother. I have heard so little of her. Were you great friends?"

"No. I was sorry for her, and I was always deeply attached to your father as you know."

"Why sorry for her? She must have had a very happy life. He was very good to her."

"She had everything that she could want. It was just one little fault of her own making which spoilt it all. I never mentioned this before, but you are no longer a child; I can trust you to let it go no further."

A terrible suspicion leapt with giant strides into Grey's mind. She put a timid question to Janet, divining the answer instinctively.

"What little fault?"

Janet lifted her elbow and put her closed fist to her mouth in dumb show.

CHAPTER XI.

Cure her of that. Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd?

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE word "heredity" formed the burden of Grey's lullaby that night, the ugly word which she had never hitherto associated with real every-day life. Now its full meaning was brought home to her in hideous realism. Had it not been for her unwillingness to disappoint her brother-in-law even the prospect of a ride would not have coaxed her from her bed the next morning.

Burton called her reluctantly at seven, and she opened her eyes with the knowledge of having something on her mind. Even in dreamland she had not been allowed to travel *incognito*, her worldly worries mobbed her and refused to be repressed. Once roused, she had no wish to go to sleep again, yet lacked the energy to get up. She was still dog-tired, but her brain was terribly wide awake. Those at peace with their surroundings may lie in bed to their hearts' content. It is a questionable luxury to the harassed. Poor Grey did not know what she wanted. Her will-power for the time being had vanished. The idea of staying where she was *à l'aise* with her thoughts was hateful, the alternative of dressing equally tedious. She rang the bell.

"Burton, can you undertake to do my hair and get me into my habit by a quarter to eight?"

"Yes, miss, if you are obliged to go. You do look white."

"But I am obliged to go. Haven't you learnt the

definition of the London Season yet. It means always doing what you feel least inclined to do at the moment."

The arrangement was that Grey should call at the hotel at eight o'clock. She found Beaumont duelling with his stock in front of the sitting-room glass, and Firenze in a white wrapper making him some tea.

"I didn't expect to find you up, madam. How are you the morn?"

"Much better. My head still aches, but I shall be dressed by the time you come back, and after breakfast Ted is going to take me for a drive. Come in here a minute."

She dragged her into the bedroom.

"Can you ever forgive me for yesterday? I've been thinking about it half the night. I never seemed to realise before how dreadful it all was, but things are going to be different from to-day. Ted doesn't suspect anything, does he?"

"No, I'm sure he doesn't."

"Thank God! and he need never know now. It shall all be a horrid nightmare between you and me. Oh! if he had guessed, I should never have forgiven myself. Now you must go. Say that you forgive me."

Her lip quivered.

"Yes, dear, yes. If I have anything to forgive. I'm not going to think anything more about it."

"You are not looking very bright, and it's all my fault. Isn't there some man you would like to ask to dinner to-night, and Ted might get tickets for something after?"

"The horses are round, Grey. We must not keep them standing."

"We'll talk about it at breakfast, then. In the meantime make a selection from your fancy men. Teddy, you've never kissed your wife. I believe that you think

much more of your horses. I might just as well have married a stable-man."

Grey was feeling much better. She ran downstairs in her anxiety to see her mount. Beaumont found her making friends with him and criticising him at the same time, after the manner of womankind. She stepped back for a better view of him.

"What do you think of him?"

"There's not much the matter with his appearance. He looks a gentleman and I'll soon find out if he behaves like one."

She took up her reins and, giving Beaumont her foot, sprang into the saddle. Before the elastic was round her ankle she was a happier woman. While Beaumont mounted his hireling she patted the bay's glossy neck to give him confidence amongst the traffic. It was his first visit to London, the groom told her, but he paid no attention to anything beyond pricking his ears occasionally at the unusual sound of a hansom bell. He seemed to put great trust in his rider, to know instinctively that she would steer him safely through the bewildering crowd. Even at Hyde Park Corner, when he caught sight of many brother hacks and felt the tan under his feet instead of the wood pavement, he only bucked a couple of times in exultation. In the equine world "bucking" is the equivalent to our laughter. As the good-natured laugh is the buck of light-heartedness, the malicious cross-kick that aims only for an empty saddle is the loud guffaw of derision. Grey felt as the bay settled down into the tedious regulation canter of the fashionable park hack that she had made a new friend worth the keeping. To have a horse on one's side she had long known to be among the sweets of life.

"You look awfully well on him, Grey; how do you like him?"

"Immensely. I don't know what you gave for him, but I should say that you have got a bargain. A perfect lady's hack is worth any money, and if I'm not mistaken he'll make as good a hunter."

"He came with a good character, but he's only a baby, you know. Four this grass."

"An infant prodigy, then. I'm not afraid of him, and any latent nonsense can be knocked out of him on the moors. Shall you take him north to-morrow?"

"Rather. I'm sick of Town and longing to be back in the country. Aren't you?"

"Not yet; but I daresay that I shall be in a few weeks."

"You'd far better change your mind and come down with us. This heat's enough to knock any one over, and you're beginning to look rather fagged. Besides, there's nothing going on."

Nothing going on, when the only man in the world was cramming for his exam. in the dullest part of Bayswater?

"I'll come as soon as I can, I promise. You needn't pretend that you'll miss me."

"I'll miss you in the stables, at any rate. Peter has hands like dumb-bells. You wouldn't like your new scalp's mouth sawn to pieces?"

He put his hand on the bay's neck, and watched the effect of his words in Grey's eyes. He had long since learnt the efficacy of that particular bait.

"No, I shouldn't; but you must ride him yourself, if you can't trust Peter."

"How you have changed, child. Two months ago you would have forfeited the whole of your London visit rather than miss the chance of schooling a young 'un."

There was no answer that Grey could make. He

spoke the truth. She was glad when a couple of men hailed Beaumont, and put an end to their conversation. They met many friends as the Park filled, and Grey found herself in the proud position of rough-rider, walking, trotting, cantering to order. She and her horse seemed to have a will in common. If she had put him in cold blood at the iron railings she knew that he would not have failed her, but have done his best.

"I'll give you your own price," said an old *roué*, "if you'll throw the jockey in. She's splendid."

"I don't fancy she's for sale."

Grey overheard the remark and Beaumont's answer while she was talking to some one else.

It was past ten, but they turned once again up the Mile. Beaumont was in high spirits. Nothing buoyed up a man more than the knowledge of a successful horse-deal, and as for Grey she revelled in every minute of her ride, fearful only lest she was not appreciating it to the utmost. The morning breeze had taken away her headache and given her fresh roses for her cheeks in exchange. She knew, too, that she looked her best on horseback, and although she had no particular wish ever to see any of her attendant satellites again, she was, after all, only a flesh and blood woman at best. She caught sight of Mr. Legge on his cob. Only Howard was wanting to make everything perfect. Even without him enjoyment was to a great extent possible.

"Let us thank our respective stars that I have the most unpunctual wife in England," said Beaumont, as they jogged along Piccadilly. "Riding in the Park is one of the things which I prefer to get second-hand, as a rule, but I must say that I liked it this morning. It's a very nice world, isn't it? Good horses, a perfect wife, and a pack of hounds. What more can any man want?"

"I notice that you put your horses first."

"Simply a matter of habit. I have lived amongst them ever since I can remember. Environment governs life far more than you think, and I can hardly yet believe that Firenze is really mine. It seems too good to be true. You must marry and come to me for a reference."

"Of my own charms or that of the married state?"

"Of both; but I meant the latter. You don't know what it means to a man who has knocked about in barracks to come in tired and find the sweetest girl in the world behind the tea-table. We've hardly tried the real thing yet, of course. Hotel life isn't the same at all, and I don't mind telling you that I'm longing to go north to see Firenze mistress of her own house."

"And you put it all on to the horses?"

"Yes, I know. It isn't a thing that I would care to discuss with everybody, but you in your way love her as much as I do. Yes, there's something better than hunting, and it's taken me nearly thirty years to discover it."

"And it's taken me eighteen," thought Grey.

A tempting breakfast was laid in the sitting-room, but Firenze was not there.

"Warm the tea-pot, there's a good girl, while I go and find the missis."

She did as she was told, then took off her straw hat and sank with a sense of delicious inactivity into an arm-chair. Her skirt was covered with foam and hairs, but she had not the energy to brush it, but just listlessly tapped the toe of one riding-boot with her whip and wished that the others would come. She had nothing against love-making in the abstract, but she was hungry. She broke a banana off the bunch at her elbow, and while she was munching it Beaumont came in. He looked troubled.

"She's not at all well. I can't understand it. She seemed so jolly when we started, and now she is lying dressed on the bed, and I can hardly get a word out of her. Does she often have these headaches?"

Grey had risen, and stood staring into space with horror in her eyes. She had not meant to betray her sister, had never dreamt that there would be occasion for it. It was Beaumont's sudden declaration that had taken her off her guard.

Yet it could not be that! It could not be!

"Why do you look like that? Why don't you answer me?"

"I beg your pardon. I — I was thinking of something else. Yes, she has suffered from neuralgia."

"Do you happen to know if she ever takes drugs to deaden the pain? She looks as if she had had a sleeping-draught."

"She might."

Beaumont paced up and down.

"And if she had finished them she might, perhaps, take something else and under-rate its strength, poor child. There is a smell of brandy in the room. It looks to me as if she had taken too much by mistake."

Grey stood clinging to the table for support. She tried to speak, but no sound came.

"Such a very little drop would go to her head, not being used to it. She ought to have advice for her headaches and not doctor herself. These narcotics do a lot of harm."

"I will see Ernestine," were the only words that Grey could utter. Her reasoning powers seemed to have left her. She forgot that then all chance of secrecy would be at an end.

"Won't you go and see *her* first?"

There was reproach in his voice. Grey felt like

a district visitor introduced unwillingly to a parochial corpse. She knew but too well what she would find. Yesterday's experience had prepared her for her sister's state, but this time the superlative mood had been reached.

Firenze seemed to have been out. She wore an old walking-dress, and her hat lay crushed beneath her head on the pillow. She was not a pretty sight. Grey wondered what the poor husband must think of the debauched face which even in two days had lost much of its fairness. Carefully powdered, in a darkened room, she might still have escaped detection, but lying in the full glare of the morning sun further concealment was impossible. There was no bottle to be seen. Such strength of brain-power as remained to her Firenze had concentrated into the discovery of a fresh hiding-place. Yesterday it had been under an unsuspecting heap of skirts; to-day, Grey felt amongst them in vain, while Edward looked tenderly at his wife. Then she slipped away into the sitting-room. From there she would go in search of Ernestine. She was not prepared for the possibility of Beaumont following her. She imagined him to be the type of man who asks nothing better than to hold his wife's hand for hours. So he was, but now he seemed to turn to Grey for support, dogging her footsteps without an idea of what to do for the best.

"What do you think about it?" he whispered, blissfully ignorant that loud shouts and noisy laughter would hardly have roused his wife.

"There is no doubt that she has had brandy."

"Yes, and I'm afraid that she will have to pay a heavy price for the over-dose. She will have an awful head to-morrow. If she is able to travel I will order a saloon, and she can lie down all the way."

"Yes, she would like that ; and now, if you take my advice, you will eat a good breakfast."

She poured out his tea, buttered his toast, and helped him to fish. He proved as biddable as a child. It would not have surprised her if she had found herself cutting up his food. Suddenly he laid down his knife and fork.

"It might easily have been poison. Just think. Distracted with pain she might have taken a bottle of lotion out of her dressing-bag instead of her flask."

Grey wondered which he would consider the deadlier poison—the single draught which kills the body outright or the constant little nips eating away by slow but sure degrees both body and mind.

All she could do was to sympathise with the poor fellow. She could not leave him just then, impatient as she was to learn details from Ernestine:

"There are some things that I shall never understand, Grey. I'm not an irreligious man, but I can't fathom the reason of all the unnecessary suffering of women, children and animals, and the cruel injustice which visits the sins of the fathers on the next generation. Look at Firenze, now. The best, sweetest, most unselfish woman that God ever made, who never harmed living creature yet. Why should she be afflicted with pain which must drive her nearly frantic?"

"Oh! I don't think it's as bad as that. Neuralgia is very acute while it lasts, but it is bearable."

She meant only to tone down the picture of Firenze's suffering which his imagination had painted in such vivid colours.

"Of course, it's as bad as that. Can't you see that it must have been about as bad as it could be or she would never have made this dreadful mistake which might easily have cost her her life?"

Grey moved towards the door nonplussed. Argument is not easy with concealment acting as a brake to one's views. Just then Ernestine came in. In her agitation she must have mistaken the perturbed look on Grey's face for reproof. She wrung her hands, and burst into hysterical sobs.

"It was not my fault. It was not my fault. Madame was better. She was reading on the sofa. Then I had my breakfast. She went out for a promenade. I come back. She was on the bed. I search. I find this in the clothes'-basket."

She produced a long, dark-green bottle from behind the screen.

Beaumont sprang up, and took it from her.

"What is she saying, Grey? What is all this? I don't understand!"

"Wait a minute—I will tell you ——"

She pressed her hands to her head. At the moment she could not have explained anything coherently to save her life.

Beaumont brought his fist down on the table.

"I see it all now. This woman has been drugging Firenze to gain her own ends. Have her boxes searched, and send her off at once. Do you understand? You have half-killed your poor mistress with that filthy stuff."

"But no, monsieur. I have told you truly how it has arrived."

"Indeed! you malign her. She is speaking the truth."

"And you mean to say that you believe this trumped-up story, *you* her sister. If she wanted brandy she has her flask, or she could ask for it downstairs. Is it likely that she would take the trouble to go out and buy it? She would not know where to go to begin with. The

thing is slanderous, iniquitous! but you are only a child. It wants a man's experience to deal with cases like these."

Grey signed to the maid to leave them.

"Sit down, Edward; and listen quietly to me. Two days ago, Firenze herself told me a terrible secret. Last night, I promised to keep it from you, believing it to be past and done with. There seemed no reason why you should know. The shock I have just received makes further silence impossible; besides, it is only right that you should be told."

She paused, and put up one hand to her throat to quell the throbbing, aching lump which had risen there.

"Go on."

"She tells me that she has developed a dreadful craving for drink during the last few weeks. She seems to think that the malaria began it. She wanted a pick-me-up to make her bright and lively for you. She began by taking a little, then more and more. Yesterday, she ordered brandy. I found her in a state of coma in the morning. In the afternoon she was wonderfully better and very penitent. She promised to turn over a new leaf, but I'm afraid that the temptation has been too strong for her. It comes over her in bouts, she says, and while they last she really is not answerable for her actions."

"I can't believe it! I can't believe it! You must be mistaken. That Frenchwoman has given it to her."

"I could not believe it myself, at first. I would give anything if I could prove myself in the wrong. The knowledge of it seems to have added years to my life. Oh! if only I had had an inkling of it before, she should never have married you."

"Don't say that. I would rather have her for my wife as things are than any other woman in the world."

It seems to me providential that she has a husband to look after her. When she has quite recovered I will talk to her seriously, and make her give me her promise not to touch anything again."

"She promised me the day before yesterday. It did no good."

"She will do it for me, though. It is not as if she didn't care for me. She is devoted to you, too, I know, but nothing can come quite as close to a woman's heart as her husband. You see that, don't you?"

"Of course. If anybody can do it you can. I hope with all my heart that you will succeed. I don't want to be a damper on you, but have you ever had to deal with a similar case before?"

"Oh! yes. There was a man in the regiment who was drinking himself to death. I was his best friend. I and the girl he was engaged to between us cured him. He is quite reformed now."

"I am glad to hear that, but they say, you know, that you can cure a man when you can't cure a woman."

"Some women, perhaps. A weak, indulgent creature, without any will-power or love for others, but not my little girl."

"And—and I ought to tell you that her mother was given to taking too much. I never knew until Janet told me last night."

"I'm afraid that Miss Simmons would consider the amount that the ordinary Society woman drinks at dinner too much. In her day one small glass of wine was the allowance. Now, she takes constantly hock, champagne, liqueurs, and sometimes port. I can't say that I like to see it, but it doesn't seem to do them any harm. Don't get morbid, Grey. The whole thing has given me a bit of a knock, I must confess, but she is little more than a child, much younger than you are, by

nature; and do you mean to tell me that my will once exerted can't overcome hers? Do you think that love such as ours counts for nothing? No, I'll take her home to-morrow, and when you come you will find her at her best again. You know what that is."

"And you don't think that I ought to come with you?"

"Not unless you're ready. Minnie will be with us. I'm more than sanguine of success. There's nothing like conceit, is there? By-the-by, I'm rather sorry that Miss Simmons knows."

"She doesn't."

"But you said that she told you about her mother."

"Yes; but it is possible to find out a thing in a round-about way. If I wanted to see the shape of a person's nose, I shouldn't look them full in the face."

"Shouldn't you?"

"No. I should take a mental snap-shot from out of the corner of my eye when he wasn't looking."

"What a funny little thing you are."

"Well, you are back? Have you enjoyed yourselves?"

Firenze stood leaning against the closed half of the door. Having given forth that one laboured remark, she shut her eyes and her head fell on to her chest.

Grey went up to her and took her hand.

"I have been telling Edward all about it, and he is going to help you to get better."

She looked up and held out her arms to her husband.

"Oh! Teddy, dear, can you forgive me this once? Will you really look after me? It seems that I am not fit to look after myself."

She tottered towards him, and he rushed forward and caught her to him.

"Sweetheart! who is better fitted to look after you

than I? We all have our little faults. When you discover mine I will come and place myself in your hands."

There was no suggestion of reproach, much less of contempt in his voice, only infinite love. He had probably never seen her look so slovenly before. In place of a smart trousseau gown she had scrambled into an old serge skirt and a dirty shirt. Tie, belt and collar were absentees, and such hair as struggled from under the battered hat was tumbled and disordered.

He noticed no change. It was his wife who clung to him, his poor, little, misguided, suffering wife, and she needed him. So long as he could help her, so long as she cared for him as she cared for him then, he asked nothing better from life.

Grey waited in vain for a look or a word from her sister, then smothering a sigh she gathered up her skirt and walked slowly back to her lodgings.

She found Janet devouring an omelette and the *Morning Post* alternately.

"Well, my child, have you had a nice ride? Have some more breakfast?"

"Now that I come to think of it I haven't had any yet except a banana, but I much prefer the good old-fashioned breakfast."

"Not had any? and it's half-past eleven. You must be ravenous?"

"No, I'm not, as it happens; but I'll have some tea."

"And you'll have an egg. An egg is like a pocket encyclopædia. It contains everything you want in a small space. How was Firenze this morning?"

"Pretty well."

"And when am I to see her?"

"I don't know, unless she can see you to-day. They go home to-morrow."

"And when do we go?"

"I don't quite know. Are you tired of Town?"

"Indeed, I am not. By-the-by, Mr. Howard came last night. I showed him your note. He said that he wouldn't wait, and that I was to pack you off to bed as soon as you came in. He'll call again to-day, I expect, on his way to the Club at luncheon-time, most likely."

"Well, I suppose I had better go and change. I don't know that I shall see him if he does come. I shall probably get into something cool and lie down."

"Very well. I shall be in. Just send me your orders later on."

Janet was never one to "question why," but she wondered what had come to Grey. She had never been known to rest at all in the day-time, much less in the seclusion of her room. That Howard was the cause of the mystery she never doubted. Grey had plainly given her to understand, in her note the previous evening, that she did not wish to meet him. It was not possible that they had had a tiff. It often takes but one to make a lovers' quarrel, but she was so absolutely sure of them both. Howard had hardly troubled to veil his infatuation when she had seen him a few hours before, and at the mere mention of his name Grey's eyes betrayed her. It might be a fit of her unaccountable shyness which prompted her unusual behaviour. People in love were queer things. Here was a couple as surely made for one another as a cup and saucer or a hook and eye. Each incomplete by itself, together of great use. A single word would put an end to anything like doubt between them, yet they must needs prolong the agony unnecessarily like a Stainer's "Amen."

Once upstairs Grey's forced gaiety deserted her. She slipped off her habit, hung it over the banisters, and locked her door against all comers.

"Ought she to go north with her sister?" That

was the question ringing in her head to the exclusion of everything else. She sat down by the window to thrash the matter out to the best of her ability. Lashed between two chariots driven different ways, standing on a border line dividing Love from Conscience. Each, in turn, dragging her bodily away in such a tug-of-war as she had never deemed possible. In many heats victory went now to one then to the other ; she herself could not have said which way the final would go. Never were sides better matched.

Her brother-in-law had refused her offer. If he had felt incompetent to look after his wife he would not have hesitated to tell her so. Such was Love's argument.

Conscience had it that the offer was half-hearted. Beaumont had no idea of the magnitude of the task he had undertaken. He was utterly ignorant of the wiles of his patient. Constant companionship was compulsory, in no wise to be relaxed during penitent convalescence. Of her unblushing untruthfulness it would also take long to convince him.

Needful instructions might be written at length. Firenze had her husband for guardian. If she would not mend her ways for him it was certain that a sister's influence would be of little avail. Had she been afflicted with consumption or cancer a different aspect would have been put upon the case. Selfish indulgence could not be rewarded in the same measure as a dread disease which neither strength of mind nor temperance could effectually lessen.

How could she expect Firenze to conquer all at once and for ever a power as dominant as drink when she herself proved unwilling to give up her lover's society temporarily? A master teaching the youngest child must know vastly more than his pupil. He who attempts to preach what he will not practise carries no conviction.

to his hearers. A mote in her own eye. A beam in Firenze's. There was nothing to choose between them. Equal in strength these master-passions—one intoxicating the body, the other the soul; one blurring human shape beyond recognition, the other scattering broadcast to the winds of heaven disposition and character, virtues to which they made no claim.

Yet there was a difference. The antidote and the poison grew side by side. One killed, the other restored to life. The ennobling influence of Howard's love was beyond dispute. Grey felt it to be as necessary to her as her religion. It could only be for her good to cultivate it. Just as much was it for Firenze's good that her vice should be worsted at all costs.

At all costs! At all costs! She herself must pay. It would not be for long. Any expenditure would be repaid with interest by her sister's cure. Plainly she saw the finger-post pointing to duty, and wondered that she had not seen it before. She would be robbed of Howard's companionship by the transaction, but enriched by letters such as only he could write. And there would be the knowledge that she was doing right. In the end she would have a good balance in hand to help her on her way. She thought for the first time of her father. It would have pained him to picture Firenze with only a strange sister-in-law and a maid about her. The most devoted husband is, after all, but a man. On her own sex Firenze had always been strangely dependent, and "Blood is thicker than water." She had almost forgotten the old lesson. Many a girl in putting aside her school-books imagines that she has wasted precious time in learning what will never be applicable to her after-life.

Grey looked round the room with a sigh. Her photographs and ornaments gave it a homely air. She

had become quite attached to it. Now she must send for Burton and give her instructions about the packing. She rose and went towards the bell. She jerked the cord violently. At the same moment the front-door bell was pulled impatiently. She would have known that ring amongst a score. Running to the window she peeped out. The top of a well-ironed hat was all that there was to be seen. A voice asked—

“Is Miss Alison at home?”

He was admitted.

Grey rushed to the wardrobe and tore down a muslin tea-gown from its peg. Some one fumbled at the door-handle. She turned the key. Janet stood outside.

“He is here, what shall I say?”

“I’m coming.”

She rushed past her, tying her waist-ribbon as she went.

Love won.

CHAPTER XII.

Let it be now love. All my soul breaks forth. How I do love you. Give my love its way. . . . Let me know you mine, prove you mine, write my name upon your brow. Hold you and have you, and then die away, if God please, with completion in my soul.

—BROWNING.

LONDON, that "giddy harumfrodite," was in shirt-sleeves and curling-pins. Custom, a ruthless blue pencil, had struck out all but bare necessities from the Society life-story. The streets were up, the best theatres closed, every other cab was highly coiffed with a bath and a bicycle. A belated spring cleaning held great sway over house and house-holder. What painters and white-washers did for one, Homburg accomplished for the other; the work of both to last a year at most, and then all over again *da capo*.

"Where we love is home." Time was when the mere thought of wood and stream would have been sufficiently magnetic to draw Grey north. Firenze wrote her pencilled scraps in the hammock. Edward sent quite graphic accounts of the cub-hunting. She could almost picture herself back in the country which she knew so well. It was a walk on springy heather pitted against the charms of patent leather shoes and a hot pavement, a gallop through the woods before the dewdrops had fallen to earth or a canter over parched grass in Richmond Park; marketing leisurely in Oakby from the T-cart or hustling through an ill-bred crowd at the sales.

An unequal balance, if Grey had not thrown her whole heart into the lighter scale. Her love for Yorkshire had in no wise lessened; it was only that her love for Howard had increased. The sudden opening of a door, and the smouldering fire had burst into flames. He had spoken. Rushing into the sitting-room in an impulsive way quite foreign to her nature on that July morning, she remembered only that she had not seen him for two whole days. He, too, was taken off his guard. He looked for the coming of the laughing school-girl, the demure little maiden or the apologetic hostess. All these moods he knew as well as he knew her frocks. When a passionate woman burst in upon him like a tornado he proved himself defenceless. He did not know that she had suddenly turned coward in the thick of a fight at the sound of his voice, and fled from danger. He did not see that mad terror in her eyes, which is learnt only at close quarters with death. He saw only two beacons of love-light to draw him safe into harbour. There seemed only one possible thing to be done. He caught her to him, and kissed her once upon the lips. The kiss of a bee gathering honey. She lay passive in his arms; Grey, that strangely unapproachable being to whom the mere touch of a man's hand brought an unaccountable shrinking. Once Fitz in his boyish infatuation had held her hand as in a vice. She had laughingly asked him if he was trying his strength, and then snatched it from him. The great Matherson, too, had deemed it waste of time to be thrown *tête-à-tête* with a pretty girl in romantic woods and not embrace her. His arm had hardly encircled her waist before she had wriggled away and run home trembling in every limb.

With Howard she attempted no resistance, but abandoned herself to the joy of the present. He had been the first to come to earth again.

"I did not mean to. I thought that I had schooled myself till I was adamant. You are too strong for me."

She had raised her head from his shoulder and smiled. A triumphant, victorious smile. Few sweeter moments come into the life of a woman than that when with one glance of her eyes she razes to the ground the jerry-built fortress of restraint which a man has imagined to be impregnable.

"Forget it. It was an accident such as often happens."

He had not exaggerated. There were lots of men who would kiss a woman even as he had kissed her for the mere gratification of the moment, but she knew that he was not one of them, that it was for her sake that he had hitherto erected a barrier between them.

"Against such accidents I hold an insurance policy. If they occur, well, I suppose that I shall receive some sort of compensation. As for forgetting, that is so like you men. You double-lock the stable-door long after the steed is stolen. Come, take back your key."

She had flung her arms round his neck and hugged him in a transport of childish delight. With those little hands half-throttling him he had no chance.

"Listen, child. I love you! I love you! I love you! There is no harm in your knowing it, but it must make no difference. There is to be nothing binding between us."

"I don't know what you call binding," Grey had said with sudden audacity. "It's no good my telling you that I love you, because you know it already; but I'll tell you something which, perhaps, you don't know—I intend to marry you."

"Some day, I hope, but for another year you are to be free. You will only be nineteen then. Until then see as much of life as you can. Enjoy yourself. If at

the end of that time you are still of the same mind I will make you the truest husband that ever woman had. A year is not so very long. I daresay that I shall get through it somehow. I shall have plenty of work, if all goes well."

"If you pass you will want somebody to keep house for you. If you don't, you will want somebody to comfort you. Oh! why waste twelve long months where we might be together? You would not be the only sufferer. Think of me, Charlie."

She had tried him very hard. He had gripped the hand which she had put into his, and looked past her into space.

"It's not as if you are the only man that I have ever met."

"Two Sandhurst cadets, an inveterate heiress-hunter and poor little Hereward. Little woman, I know life better than you do. I'll look after you as long as you remain in Town. We'll keep company, as the servants say, whenever you want walking out, but what I want you to understand is that if the day comes when you feel that you have made a mistake you have only to tell me so. It would be no breach of contract, for there is no contract made. No stigma would rest on you. You are as free as air. In a word, what I am trying to convey to your ladyship is that under no circumstances will I consent to be engaged to you."

"And under no circumstances will I ever consent to be engaged to anybody else. I love you, Charlie. There is no stronger word that I can use, because a stronger word does not exist. You think me a fanciful child. Some day, perhaps, you will know the meaning of what I have just said."

So the compact was made. Each plighted their troth to the other, but it was not to be counted valid. Neither

of them worried. An acknowledged engagement would have brought them no further happiness, perhaps less. The answering of congratulatory letters would have been irksome, and they would have been constantly focussed by the public gaze. As it was, they continued to act in the same way as they had done for the past three months. Howard's sudden avowal made no difference. Such patent love had spoken for itself in a thousand other ways.

Sweet September came, the month when the north reaches the zenith of her beauty. Grey was beginning to droop. Howard was working hard. There were many weary hours to be lived through apart from him. Sometimes he could give her but one meagre half-hour a day. During that time love acted as an elixir, lending a temporary sparkle to her eyes and flush to her cheeks which were the saving of her. If her lover had come in upon her unawares some hot morning he would have given her her marching orders there and then. Janet, too, was pining for her parsonage home on the Sussex downs. She never complained, but Grey noticed the listless way in which she dragged herself along and that she never entered a picture gallery. It had been an unwritten law from the first that they should stay in Town till Howard's exam. Grey knew that he loved to have her there, otherwise she would have struck her tent long before. He had bought a grey Arab which she kept exercised, but poor Janet was no horsewoman, and the memory of the patient face that watched her return in the sitting-room window lessened the pleasure of her rides greatly.

One morning Howard came in on his way to his crammer's.

"Grey, I want you to come and dine at Mrs. Copley's with me to-night. She has been very

good to me, and wants to see you. She sometimes has rather amusing little dinners."

"Oh! I'm frightened. I know what your clever people's amusing little dinners are. A hot-bed of forced epigrams that haven't the right flavour about them, but which everybody pretends to enjoy. I'll come, of course, because you wish it, but I give you fair warning that if any man hurls an epigram at me it will hit me hard, and I sha'n't recover all the evening."

"Nonsense! If he does, give him as good in return. Coin a false one on the spur of the moment. He won't confess his ignorance and ask for an explanation, you may be sure. He'll just turn the conversation, and think what a clever little woman you are."

"And that's just what I'm not. At least, my only form of cleverness is deluding my fellow-creatures into the belief that I am. Does that count?"

"More than all the 'ologies' in existence."

Janet allowed Howard to call for Grey in a hansom at half-past seven. Mrs. Copley rented an artist's house in Hyde Park Gate. They had received orders to go in by the studio entrance. On the door was a bronze wolf's head knocker, and above it in gold lettering the familiar words—"Pull the bobbin and walk in"—no one was announced at these informal gatherings. They heard some one playing restless snatches of a song on the piano as they went in. Mrs. Copley was a finished musician and *improvisatrice*, but that night she could settle to nothing. The man she loved was bringing a girl to dinner. He was not engaged to her. So much he had assured her, but there was more than a possibility that some day she would become his wife. He owed this confidence to their old friendship he told her. A doctor would have comforted her with the threadbare phrase "While there is life there

is hope," but she could see the bare truth peeping through the darns. Two years before, in the lifetime of her husband, this boy, ten years her junior, had cast over her a spell of infatuation in which she was still enmeshed. They had met at a time when Howard was bitter and sceptical of good in mankind. Her views in most things tallied strangely with his, and ever since she had been assiduously moulding herself into the sort of woman that he upheld. It was to avoid his censure that she retired into seclusion for some months after the death of the husband whom she had made no pretence of loving. A less clever woman would have clapped her unclipped wings in his face with indecent exultation. She and Mrs. Grundy had long been dead cuts, but for his sake she had quietly bided her time and only a few weeks before had swooped down upon him again. She had become all that he had wished her to be in the days when she had undoubtedly had a certain power over him, and now he did not want her any longer.

She reminded Grey of a clever cat on a china-shelf as she wound in and out amongst divans and Turkish tables to meet them without so much as touching one with her train. She was dressed in a wonderful chiffon gown of flame colour, with a bunch of William Allan Richardson roses in her golden girdle. The reflection of the flame was in her eye as she looked at Howard.

"You came in by the studio-door? That's right. I'm not in Town, you know."

"But nobody is in Town, so, other things being equal, why were we not allowed to come in the ordinary way?"

"Ah! I forget how young you are. Don't you know that often Town is fullest when it seems emptiest: what would you expect to find in a house of shutters and holland covers? A policeman and his wife care-taking,

I suppose. If you rang my front-door bell Graham would answer it in his baize apron. They are in season yet—look there.”

Through the folding-doors an exquisitely decorated dinner-table and a couple of men in livery were to be seen.

“And so you have brought a new friend to see me. I am very glad to see you, Miss — Grey, is it not?”

“Yes. Grey Alison.”

“Ah! Grey is only your first name, I remember now. That’s a name to live up to. You ought to write or paint or keep a bonnet shop with a name like that. Perhaps you do?”

Grey shook her head.

“And there are some names that one feels one must live down to. Jones, for instance. There are no Jones here, I hope, glancing furtively under the piano. The only one that I can think of is the knife-boy, and if he isn’t in the pantry it isn’t my fault, is it? There was Tom Jones, of course, but he was fictitious. The sort of thing that an author insists upon doing is to endow nonentities with adventures which they could not possibly experience in real life.”

All the time that Mrs. Copley chatted so flippantly, Grey knew that she was taking stock of her dress and appearance. A prolonged study of the lore of Messrs. Maskelyne & Cooke had taught her that the time to watch the conjuror closely is during his inane patter, not when he draws attention to the fact that he has nothing up his sleeve.

“I have not asked a large party to meet you, Miss Alison. Captain Stapleton and Mr. Coleman are coming. Of course, you know Mr. Coleman?”

“Only by name; if you mean, I was going to say, the great amateur stage-manager?”

"Yes, the same. He's not coming here professionally to-night. He happened to be passing through. We tease him a great deal about *the* profession, and it's not a bad one. He spends nothing on house-rent, he is a gentleman and he meets nice people and all in exchange for a little *savoir faire* and an aptitude for turning the conversation in an awkward crisis. To turn a conversation deftly, to modulate from the topic of a family skeleton to the latest *bon mot* without any one noticing the change of key, ought to qualify any man to put that odious appendage Mus. Bac. after his name."

"Here comes the log-roller," said Howard, who was turning over a portfolio of etchings with the privilege of an *habitué*.

Mr. Coleman was a bald-headed, clean-shaven man, with the penetrating eye of a sea-gull. Like the sea-gull, he was carnivorous, but not from choice. To the weather-wise his advent often also foreboded stormy weather.

Beneath his white waistcoat were hidden ducal secrets, marital wrongs, even royal peccadilloes. Society had turned his roomy heart into an aristocratic pawn shop. When it pined for the sympathy which it frequently finds more difficult to obtain than hard cash, it parted with priceless possessions to him, knowing that they were safe and perfect secrecy maintained.

Business was not conducted at Mr. Coleman's house. Indeed, he had no settled home. There would also have been the danger of his clients meeting on the door-step. Mahomet's time-worn alternative answered better. He visited them instead, and it spoke well for his genuine goodness of heart that no door was ever closed against him when once opened.

He nodded to Howard, and took Mrs. Copley's outstretched hand as if he would like to have had it on a

ninety-nine years' lease. A telling trick of the trade. He had long known of her love for Howard, but could not quite locate the young girl in white. She was probably asked to make a *parti carré*. Bread and butter for two hours would be his fare. He was self-invited and must take pot-luck. When Guy Stapleton came in he saw his hostess's game. The nursery meal was for him. The tall Guardsman was the handsomest in the Brigade. A wily bird, not to be caught with chaff. Mrs. Copley could hardly believe her good fortune when he actually appeared. She went to the far end of the studio to meet him. Cerberus must be fed.

"At last! How good of you to come all the way from Windsor; and how well you are looking. I often wonder why it is that all the handsomest men are called Guy."

"Little lady, you have gone out of mourning. How sweet you are, and what a dress."

She was a tall woman, but he had long since learnt the power of the endearing adjective.

"Do you like it? Guy, you must not mind much, old boy, but you can't take me in to dinner to-night."

"But I can sit on your other side. The procession into the ark counts for nothing, but only the jumble-sale when you get there."

"No, not even that. You are going to take in a nice, fresh-cut little heiress, a Miss Alison, and you are to be kind to her. It's time you married, Guy, and paid your debts. I mean it. This sort of thing's all very well, but ——"

"What's in the wind, Mab? What's your game? What other men are here?"

"Oh! only Charlie Howard, a sailor-boy, who is cramming for the F.O., and dear old Colie."

She moved into the light.

"We won't wait any longer, I think. Char Dundas said she was coming, but she's never been known to be punctual for anything in her life. Miss Alison, may I introduce Captain Stapleton? You haven't met Mr. Howard, have you?"

"Why, of course I have. How are you, Howard? Mrs. Copley prepared me for a little 'middy.'"

Mrs. Copley bit her lip.

"Captain Stapleton, will you take the other end of the table and put Miss Alison on your right? Master Midshipmite, your young woman ought to arrive with the fish. Come, Mr. Coleman."

Etiquette never troubled Mrs. Copley. She had meant to go in to dinner with Howard, but the look on Stapleton's face forced her to change her tactics at the last moment.

They had hardly finished their melon when a tall girl in black came in.

She wagged her hostess's hand in passing, and then hurried to her seat.

"Awfully sorry, Mabel. It was a quarter to eight before I went up to undress for dinner—hardly know what I've got on now—neck or nothing. How do, Colie? Why aren't you my partner in indigestion? I want to speak to you on urgent business underlined."

She nodded to Stapleton, and then put up a single eye-glass and stared at Grey.

"Mabel, introduce me to my *vis-à-vis*. I've seen you in the Row on a grey Arab. I thought that he was going to bolt with you the other day."

"He tries to run away every time. I call him the Kalifa."

"Good. Now let me study my dinner. The best of a dinner at this time of year is that you don't know exactly what's coming. If any one passes me the *menu*

in the season I say to him, 'My good man, I can tell you exactly to an ortolan what I'm going to eat every night from now till the middle of July.'"

Conversation was public during the soup and fish. Miss Dundas hurled most of her remarks at Mr. Coleman. She did not wait for an answer. She wished to get in his good books with as little trouble to herself as possible. He did not interest her, but she was carrying on an intrigue with a married man and he was the only person that she could trust to smother the wife's new-born suspicions with despatch. Some women have the audacity to push their visiting-cards into the letter-box and expect the same favours as those who pay a friendly call.

Later, all set-to-corners for a time. Mrs. Copley had quite dropped her careless *badinage*. She hardly touched the delicacies on her plate, and talked to Howard in an undertone with her chin resting in the palm of her hand. All the tender feeling of which she was capable had centred in the deep-blue eyes, transparent curtains thinly veiling the flaring passion within. She had not been a good woman. These same eyes had proved dangerous "will-o'-the-wisps" to mankind more than once. Then Howard came, and the biter was bit. For his sake she would willingly have broken every link of the past and started afresh. She had made the attempt, and the schooling of the past year could not be all in vain. It was his safety and well-being only that she desired she assured herself. Rahab's scarlet thread would not be misjudged.

Grey noticed the stately head set so perfectly on its long, white neck and shoulders, and wished that Miss Simmons could have seen her profile. She was not afraid of her. At her age, a woman neither knows her own power nor any one else's. Stapleton was eating his

dinner in sulky silence. Grey was glad it fell to her lot to talk to Mr. Coleman. He had a kind face, and was not likely to dip her against her will in a sea of difficulties.

"I wonder that I have never met you before, Miss Alison. I thought that I knew all this season's *débutantes*."

"I don't wonder so very much. You see, I have not been much on the beaten track."

"Dear lady! if you will give me the address of the unbeaten track I shall be everlastingly grateful to you. I went down to Cornwall the other day for a little rest. They had a telephone, an early post, and every modern inconvenience."

"Yet you wouldn't really like to be without them. Some man must have agitated for them. Telegraph posts are not sown in the hedgerows by the birds. You love your common round, now don't you?"

"Yes, perhaps I do; but I enjoy a holiday beyond measure. It's a great treat to me to sit amongst the audience for a change. I only got back from a moor near Carlisle last night, and am off to Perth for a grouse-drive or some such show to-morrow."

"You must be fond of travelling, too. Fancy coming up to Town from the Borders and then rushing north again immediately."

"No, I'm not; but I'm fond of comfort. It's the little things in life that matter, not the big ones. Cross-country journeys, however short, are more trying to the temper than twenty-four hours in an express. A cold in the head is more tedious than a severe bronchial attack. You have to make up your mind to the big things, but can't reconcile yourself to the little ones. Besides, to climb down a bit, I've never been able to understand Bradshaw. I've stopped two elopements

by 'faking' the time-table, but I honestly couldn't find out a train to save my life."

"I expect you have never tried. You remind me of the old man in *Romany Rye* who taught himself Chinese, and couldn't tell the time by the clock. If he had taken the trouble, of course he could have mastered it in a few minutes."

"I don't know. They say that a swell mathematician can't do a simple sum; but, after all, I dare say that it does amount to laziness. At school we calculated which question the master would ask us, according to our place in form, and learnt that one only. I don't suppose that you would fag up the Stuart period for a history exam. if you had a straight tip that it would deal chiefly with the Wars of the Roses. No one works over-time if he can help it."

"No; and that shows that there's something wrong somewhere. I should like to see the day when every one worked for the joy of the working, and had his master's interest as much at heart as his own. I'm afraid that natures warped by the greed of possession predominate, but there are some who prove that they love God's gifts for themselves. The true gardener revels in flowers, no matter to whom they belong; and one of the most beautiful things to watch is the devotion of nurses to other people's children."

"That is a sort of thing that I should have imagined would strike me more than you. You, for instance, would be devoted to all children, I am sure."

"No. I am fond of them. If it happened that I had another woman's children to bring up I would do the best I could for them, but it has always passed my comprehension how a woman could be expected to care for any one else's in the same degree as her own. The wicked step-mother in the fairy stories has often struck

me as an object of pity. She would have to be such a paragon of virtue not to show the difference which she could not possibly help feeling."

Mrs. Copley caught the words "fairy stories." She had tried every expedient to keep Howard's attention but that which in her inmost heart she knew to be the one subject that interested him.

"How young she is!"

"Yes, thank God!"

Captain Stapleton suddenly awoke to the fact that his hostess was flirting desperately with the "boy." He determined to pique her by "taking on" the little thing in white.

"I've been puzzling over your face this last quarter of an hour. I'm sure that I've seen you somewhere before."

He had not the slightest recollection of ever having seen her, but he had noticed that it always pleased women to tell them so.

"Most likely. I've seen you dozens of times, or somebody just like you. All you men are so exactly alike."

"Are we?"

"Yes. I'm sure that I must have bowed to at least a dozen men at Lord's that I didn't know, but if there's any doubt about it it's the best plan. If you do happen to know them you don't get the credit of cutting them, and if you don't you give them the trouble of raising their hats for nothing. I believe that there are lots of men who consider even that an effort. I met a poor thing last week who bewailed the fact that he had to dine in Belgrave Square. It was so far out. I felt so much inclined to offer him eighteen-pence for his cab-fare."

"I'm afraid that you don't think much of us as a race?"

"Yes, I do. On the contrary, I'm very fond of you, but I do like a wide mind that can see things from more than one point of view. A mental squint is not half a bad thing. I heard of some one the other day who learnt to bicycle in a circus, and took it as a personal insult that roads were straight."

He muttered something in Latin.

"Oh! I'm glad that you said that, because I am still young enough to enjoy sweets, and you can translate while I eat."

"You don't mean to say you like 'that stuff,'" indicating the ice pudding and hot chocolate sauce.

"Yes. I like extremes."

"Of affection?"

"Yes. I would rather be hated than tolerated any day."

"Wouldn't you rather be loved?"

He leant forward and looked her full in the face.

"Why, of course."

"I am going to ask you a straight question—Do you think—can you picture to yourself the possibility of any one ever being able to love me?"

"I can't answer off-hand. If you will write and enclose a dozen stamps we will give the matter our most careful consideration."

"Why do you turn everything I say into ridicule? Have I deserved it?"

"Frankly, I think that you have. You were very rude to me during the first part of dinner. You didn't address a single remark to me, and only nodded when Miss Dundas spoke to you. We cannot, unfortunately, choose who shall take us in to dinner, but if every disappointed person showed their annoyance as plainly as you did I'd as soon go in with a deaf-mute."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Alison, with all my heart.

I confess that I was disappointed when I was told off to take you in. It wasn't that I loved the fox less, but the hounds more. You understand?"

"But you didn't like the look of the fox much? Come, honest Injun?"

"No, I didn't. Oh! Miss Alison, you can imagine that things have come to a pretty pass when a man feels a bitter dislike to sitting for a couple of hours beside a fresh young girl, when he prefers to spoil his palate with unwholesome savouries and can't even taste the sweets which he once loved like a boy."

Grey crumbled her toast.

"Couldn't you knock off savouries if they don't agree with you?"

"Not by myself. I haven't the strength of mind. Will you help me?"

"Yes, if you will let me."

"How will you begin?"

"If I were you I should go away and put in a month's cub-hunting somewhere."

"Isn't it better for the patient to be under his doctor's eye for a bit. Wouldn't the doctor hunt too?"

"A doctor's time is not always his own."

"Sometimes he qualifies but does not need to practise, but he might advise a friend. You hunt, I'm sure?"

"Yes."

"Oh! couldn't you find a chaperon and come down to Devonshire for a fortnight? It would give me such pleasure to hunt with you. I have a cousin down there, a dear little woman, and ——"

"The chaperon is not a difficulty, for I have one who, like the historic fatted calf, has been in the family for years. It is very good of you, but my time is hardly my own at present. Some doctors, you know, have their

time so fully occupied that they can't manage to take even one fresh case. You understand?"

"Miss Alison, I have been bowing to your right ear for five minutes."

Grey started, and apologised.

Stapleton handed her her gloves.

"Then you revoke your partner's lead intentionally? Is it a punishment for my barbarous exhibition of dummy?"

"You asked me to prescribe. I did."

"Yes, but ——"

The "little thing in white" was already at the door. Mrs. Copley put a flame-coloured arm round her and pushed her into the studio.

"Play something, Char. I want to talk to this child."

Grey found Mrs. Copley very easy to get on with. They both loved the same man, though, as yet, only the elder knew it. It was a great link.

"My darling held her own amongst them all," said Howard as they drove away. "What were you doing with Stapleton—I never saw him so deferential to a woman before?"

"I'm sorry for Captain Stapleton, Charlie. I think he's had a bad start somehow. There's a starting-machine wanted pretty badly in Society, it strikes me."

She did not speak again for some time.

"You are very quiet?"

"I'm still thinking about Captain Stapleton. He has quite a nice face, really. I wish ——"

"Quite a nice face! Do you know that he's acknowledged to be the best-looking man in Town. The women are mad about him, and you have apparently thought of nothing else since we left, and here we are at Hamilton Place. Is this the behaviour of an engaged young woman?"

"But I'm not engaged. If I liked to break with you to-night you couldn't reproach me. It was your own idea, remember, not mine. Old boy! I don't like that Dundas girl. She's bad form. Mrs. Copley is undoubtedly a lady. Why does she have her there?"

"I can't imagine; unless the cart-horse is put in to show off the thorough-bred."

"Why don't you smoke? You seem more human when you smoke."

"I had forgotten all about it."

He took out a cigarette, and struck a match on the stand at his elbow.

Grey struck another, and held it up close to his face.

"Now I can see you. That's better. Oh! what a terrible thing love is. If anything came between us I think that I should go mad. I hadn't the vaguest idea what it was like before. When I heard of a girl being in love I used inwardly to despise her. 'So-and-so has had a disappointment,' they used to say, and I thought, 'Poor fool! what a storm in a tea-cup. One man's as good as another so long as he's thoroughly nice.' Now I know that that has nothing to do with it, that nothing satisfies except the real one be he what he may. I believe that you have fewer faults than any one I know, but that isn't why I love you. I love you because you are you, and shall do till I die. Tell me, is it always like this, or have I taken the fever very badly?"

"No, it's not always like this. At least, I never felt it before, not even in the happiest days of my engagement."

"Oh! I can't bear to think of that time. I wonder if you care as much as I do; I wonder how much your love could stand? Tell me, what would you do if something very dreadful happened, if I died, or something tried to kill our love?"

She felt his arm tighten round her as if frightened that she might escape.

"Don't," he said in a husky voice. "There are some things that I'd rather not discuss even in jest, but one thing I will tell you, that nothing and nobody on earth can kill my love for you, not even yourself. You might stamp and trample on it and cut it in two like a poor worm, but it would join together again. Only death or you can stop our marriage. Oh! Grey! Grey! Grey! I wish that the year of probation were over. I never knew until to-night how much you cared."

"Oh! couldn't it be sooner? You must see now that I know my own mind. Couldn't we be married without any fuss in the little church at home? I could walk in quite quietly one morning with the roses and the birds and one or two more for witnesses. In less than half-an-hour I would be yours beyond all earthly dispute. Heart! 'dost thou like the picture?'"

"Don't tempt me, child. The year will soon pass, and then I shall feel that I married you with your eyes open. Then if you can still bear to leave your beautiful home and put your shoulder to the wheel in Town we will work together. You must not let me be idle; but you would never wish it, I know."

"Never. Your duty to your country must come first. I won't have it neglected even for me. I mean the world to hear as much of my husband's public life as it shall hear little of his home life."

The cab was turning up Half-Moon Street.

"Tell him to go round by Bond Street while you finish your cigarette."

Howard pushed up the trap-door and gave his instructions.

"And turn your head this way. Smoke into my hair,

so that when I brush it out the smell will remind me that it is not all a dream."

"What a queer girl you are. Most women detest stale smoke."

"Cigarette-smoke doesn't grow stale in twenty-four hours, and before then, perhaps, who knows, we might have met again."

He put his hand under her chin and raised her face towards him.

"There is just the off-chance. What a clever little thing it is."

Neither spoke again for some time. They were but too content to be propelled silently along in their rubber-tyred gondola.

Half-Moon Street hove in sight only too quickly.

"We are just home. Good-night, sweetheart."

He kissed her lips and eyes and hair. She threw up her head and laughed.

"You are not kissing me, but Lady Nicotine. I'm jealous."

"I wonder if you could be jealous?"

"I don't. I know. 'A woman God did make me.' It would be the suppressed form. The kind that kills. Are you coming in to see Simmie?"

"No. I've a hard day to-morrow. I wish you'd give the grey a good gallop in the morning. I can't possibly exercise him myself. Where's your latch-key?"

She gave him her hand. The key hung on her bangle. It was very dark. He struck a match.

"There you are. Now run up to bed. You are looking pale. Mind, if you're the least bit tired in the morning you're not to ride. Promise."

Grey stamped her foot on the step. She loved teasing him.

"No, I won't promise. You've no right to order me

about yet, you know. I'm free for another year. Free, free, free. *Vive la liberté!*"

She waved her arms over her head, and went in laughing.

"Well, *au revoir*, mademoiselle."

"*A demain*, monsieur."

The door shut. That was their parting. "By-and-by is easily said."

BOOK II.

THE SWEETENING.

"I thought father said she was exceptionally well found," said the girl.

"So she is," said the skipper; "but it's this way with ships. She's all here, but the parts have not learnt to work together yet. They've had no chance. Every inch has to be twined up and made to work with its neighbour. 'Sweetening' her, we call it."

"And how will you do it?" the girl asked.

"We can no more than drive and steer her and so forth, but if we have rough weather this trip, she'll learn the rest by heart."

—RUDYARD KIPLING.

CHAPTER XIII.

Any woman can give up the world for a man, that is easy enough. When it comes to giving him up for his own sake, it is another matter. If a woman can do that, it should atone for many sins.

—JOHN OLIVER HOBBS.

I never will look more into your face till God says "Look".

—AURORA LEIGH.

JANET, in a drab dressing-gown and four of Hinde's swingle-bars on her forehead, was bending over an Etna when Grey came in. Amongst other precepts of the wastefulness of London Society she had learnt that the bigger the dinner to which one is bidden the less one eats. The night-caps she insisted upon making for her charge varied with the formality of the invitation. Grey had learnt to translate a printed card into a breakfast-cup of cocoa; a verbal message meant biscuits and a lemon squash. She imagined that Janet would be in sore straits to effect a compromise to-night, for she had been asked at a day's notice to break a stranger's bread. She raised the lid of the pan and saw that it was boiled bread and milk.

"Food for babes. The best thing for me to-night. You are a witch. If Hansel were here he should help me to push you bodily into the oven. I'm not strong enough to do it alone. I feel a baby to-night, delightfully sleepy and not a care in the world."

"Do babies come home smelling of tobacco? I only ask for information."

Grey laughed.

"I haven't been smoking, if that's what you mean? I would tell you if I had. They say that love and smoke are the only things that can't be hidden. Personally, I've no intention of trying to conceal either."

"Come, draw up your chair, and tell me what sort of an evening you had, unless you want to read these."

She handed her a couple of letters off the mantel-piece.

"I'll read Firenze's. It won't take a minute. Edward's hunting-diary will keep."

Janet would as soon have thought of reading the letter itself as Grey's face. She occupied herself by sugaring the bread and milk.

"Oh! Janet! Janet! what do you think?"

She threw the letter across to her. It was very short.

"Come home, grey mouse, I want you ever so much. I'm feeling more depressed and ill than I have ever felt in my life; but I think that there's a reason for it, the very best reason in the world! I've said nothing to Ted yet. Oh, Grey! how shall you like to be an aunt?"

"Isn't it beautiful? I must go at once, to-morrow. Poor little Firenze! How lonely she must be."

"I am very, very glad. I have always looked forward to the day when I should be able to paint her with a child in her arms. Look in my work-basket in the school-room when you get home, and send me my knitting-book. I can make the sweetest little socks and hoods to keep the baby-bunting warm."

"You are not coming with me, then?"

"No. They want me so much at home, but I will write long letters to cheer the darling up."

They were very silent after that. Both mused on the wonderful thing that in due time would come to

pass. Firenze, almost yesterday a mischievous school-girl, in a few months to be endowed with the blessing of motherhood. Grey looked further ahead. The pattering of unsteady footsteps in the deserted nursery once again—a new kingdom founded in their midst. She had asserted only that evening that she could feel no deep love for another woman's children. She had believed that she meant it, yet Firenze herself could hardly have been more overjoyed at the great news. She went to her room and flung herself on her knees in thankfulness. No fear now of the return of the dread shadow. Occupation was what Firenze needed. Satan laid wait for idle hands, but those of a true mother could never long remain so, be she amongst the highest in the land.

The envelope in her hand reminded her of Edward. She wondered if he knew by that time. Firenze had never been known to keep a secret for more than a few hours, and her letter was dated four days back. As usual, she had forgotten to post it.

She hurriedly broke the seal. People who sealed their letters, she had always noticed, were those who never had anything particular to say or do. The business man has no time for such precautions, knows too, perhaps, that it is safer to enclose a cheque or important communication in a plain envelope that attracts no attention.

Grey jumped on the bed to read her letter in comfort. It was not as long as usual. Edward wrote to her in diary form, as a rule, adding piecemeal every evening the record of the week's sport. This began in the ordinary manner—

"MY DEAR GREY,—When are you coming to us? Can you not manage it soon? To tell you the truth I am terribly worried about Firenze. I hoped that she was so much better, but very reluctantly I am obliged

to confess that all my efforts have not been very successful after all. Things seemed to be going very smoothly until the beginning of the week. Then an unaccountable fit of depression came over her. I watched her most carefully and hardly left her, but she was too quick for both me and Ernestine. Enderby is, of course, simply wax in her hands, and suspects nothing. He gave her the cellar key or whatever she asked for, and when I hid it she must have gone down to the Harebell.

"For the last three days she has been in a piteous state, far worse than she was in London. In my search I found three empty brandy bottles. I have been obliged to take Dr. Hewitt into my confidence, for at the present rate she will kill herself if strong measures are not taken. He was most sympathetic, and advises me to send her to a private home for a year to get the poison out of her system. The difficulty would be to induce her to go there; unless she voluntarily signs a paper we are powerless to enforce it, and, indeed, I cannot bear to think of her in isolation there if any other alternative can be found. There is no one that I can turn to but you.

"Can you not come here to live altogether as you used to do? You know that neither of us ever liked the thought of your making a home elsewhere, however near. You dearly love the place, and it would not seem much like bondage to you who are so devoted to her. You would have as much hunting as you wanted, and I would take my full share of watching, of course.

"Indeed, I have such faith in your cheerful companionship that I hope that after a short time neither of us will be required to do sentry-go. What she wants, I firmly believe, is a girl of her own age to talk nonsense to her and keep her amused. I shouldn't wonder if loneliness were at the root of the whole matter. She was

all right when you two lived here before. She married, and found the honeymoon a little tedious if the truth were known. Since Minnie left she has had nobody but me, and I ought to have guarded against this. Nobody can live on love. I daresay that if I hadn't the kennels I might have felt a little bit bored too, and she hasn't even had that excitement, poor child. She doesn't seem to understand house-keeping very well, in fact, she is not in a fit state to look after things just at present.

"If you would wire to say that you are coming it would be the best news in the world."

Of course, she would go without a moment's delay. Firenze should not be sent to prison. She would bail her out. Edward had been kept in the dark as to the real state of affairs, that was evident. He had spoken of Firenze's "unaccountable depression" without an inkling of its origin.

Knowing what she did, Grey at first was inclined to underrate the horror of his subsequent disclosure. It struck her as being sufficiently serious, but the outcome of a natural cause. Her village experience had taught her how often maternity brings light-headedness if not temporary madness in its train. Firenze had never been good at bearing pain or discomfort. If brandy could soothe her she would not think twice about taking it. It was unfortunate that having once begun she had not known when to stop, but the circumstances in this case were extenuating.

Grey wondered if she could catch the ten o'clock train. To her it seemed a matter of life and death. There was woman's work to be done, and at once. To keep her sister cheerful as she alone could, not only for her own sake but for that of the little life to come. Her thoughts centred on the child. For the first time

she seemed to understand its handicap. She sprang to the floor and began to pace the room. An innocent being brought unasked into the world with the mill-stone of hereditary vice hanging round its tiny neck. Bound by previous agreement to serve Satan, to give him the monopoly of labour. Predestined to evil, what chance would it have? The thought was hideous. She dragged one of her trunks from under the bed and changed from her dinner-dress to her dressing-gown, preparatory to packing. Then she remembered Beaumont's pressing invitation to live at Owlcliffe for always, for a year at least. What did it mean?

She sat down and read the letter over again. Edward liked her she knew, but he would have compelled himself to like his wife's sister in any case. They had never been in the slightest degree antagonistic, yet she knew that if it had not been for the hunting they would not have had much in common. He never cared to speak to her when Firenze was by, and she knew that if the truth were known he would infinitely prefer that for part of the year, at any rate, he and his wife should be left *à l'écart*!

What did it mean? she asked herself again. The answer came upon her with the suddenness of a Scotch mist beheading a mountain. In his heart he felt that Firenze's disease was incurable, that he preferred her constant presence to that of a trained nurse. She argued with herself that the doctor had spoken of a year. Surely he knew best. Then it flashed across her mind that although he was a stranger to her brother-in-law he was the softest-hearted man she knew. He would lack the moral courage to give the poor bridegroom his plain, unvarnished opinion to swallow in a lump. By degrees, in small silver-papered pilules, he would accomplish the hateful task. A whole year in any case! It was only the thin edge of the wedge.

Charlie!

It was the first time that she had thought of him since she came upstairs. It was characteristic of the terms on which they stood that he had never had a place in anything that worried her. Now some unseen force suddenly unfurled a monster map before her eyes. In the far north she saw her path clearly marked in blood-red, and his in the black bullet which stood for the Metropolis. Both distinctly apart, with ever such a space between. She could not see what held the map, but fancied that it was no misshapen cloven hoof, but soft white fingers, and that the fluttering of wings was in the air.

She must give up her love for a year. She knew that he would accept her conditions unquestioningly. Both of them would suffer, but after all it was only what he had wished all along. Then at the end of the year she could send for him.

Could she? If that were so there was nothing to prevent their correspondence, and they would be just as they were at the start.

But what else could she do? She could not give him up altogether. Yet her place was at her sister's side. There was no doubt of that. Even if she were completely cured in a year, and the possibility was uncertain, it would not be right to leave her alone immediately, to relapse into her former ways it might be. When once she arrived there she knew that she would be expected to stop.

A delightful plan danced suddenly into Grey's mind. Howard loved the country. At the end of the year they would be married and take a little house close to Owlcliffe. Edward would, perhaps, give Charlie the post of sub-agent. In that way she would be able to keep Firenze still under supervision.

But his work. She had forgotten that. He loved the country indeed, but his work had begun to take such hold of him that she doubted if he could ever reconcile himself to give it up while he was young and able-bodied. For her sake he might, but he would never think quite the same of her for asking him to do so. She remembered his words to her in the cab only that night—"You must not let me be idle, but you would never wish it, I know." Well, he would not be idle. He would have other and healthier work. He was not a town-bird by any manner of means. He would like it better. And all the time that she was arguing with herself she knew that he was not the man to put his own likes and dislikes first. His sense of duty was abnormal. So was hers, but she could not see why they could not reach the same end by one road side by side. Alas! as in a hockey match, they were playing for different goals; each equally meritorious to gain, but wide apart. They would perhaps meet again and again in mock civil war, be hurt even in the skirmish, but her way would not be his, nor his hers.

"I can't let him go," she moaned. "I can't! I can't! I can't! Anything but that, O God! and I would have done it."

The full meaning of her love for this man had only just dawned upon her. She seemed drawn to him by some strange magnetic force felt only by one soul for its twin. It placed every other man outside the pale. She was for him alone till death. To marry him, to go through life by his side, to become the mother of his children was the utmost she could ask. If that might not be, a lone, obsolete existence was all that was possible.

Another question tortured her. "*How would he have acted in her place?*" If he had felt that it would be for her good to sacrifice her, not for a stated time but

for always, would he have done it? Yes, both would and could.

In that moment of conviction she made up her mind. Her only solace was in the knowledge that he would have upheld her action. Her love for Firenze counted for nothing. In the beginning it had been the *raison d'être* of the whole affair. At the finish it was pushed aside as beneath notice. She determined to write to Howard at once lest she should be tempted to go back upon her word. She had never loved him so much as then when she gave him up for his own sake. It was only because he was worth it that she was able to do it. He himself was the means of his own undoing. A poorer stamp of man, lacking in emulation, she would probably have kept by her.

It would not be an easy letter to write. Short of downright falsehood it would have to be as cruel as she could make it. There must not be so much as a word in it to suggest regret for what she had done. Youth and inexperience she must plead as her motive, the real one to be hidden fathoms deep. She drew up her chair to the table and began to write more rapidly than she had dared to believe possible. All through it was the strength of mind of him she was setting at liberty that kept her up to the mark. It struck her as being almost laughable; like asking him to issue invitations to his own funeral. After a few erasures the rough draft was finished—

“MY DARLING,—You were right, as you always are. I am going to ask you to be merciful, and not to take back your words. You said, the other day, that if ever the time came when I wished our engagement (for such it was) to end, you would not reproach me. I do wish it. Something has happened which makes it impossible that

we can be anything but friends, and perhaps it would be just as well, for a time, if we were not even that. Do not ask me to explain. All I can tell you is that there is nobody else. Believe me only that I know that I am doing right. I go north to-morrow. For God's sake! don't try to see me.

"You will always have my sympathy in your work, although now it must be given in silence; also my heartfelt wish for your future happiness.—GREY."

It struck her as being very cold and stilted. She set her teeth and made a fair copy of it. Then she put down her pen and tried to picture what effect it would have on him. An ordinary man would take his dismissal from it, would be a little piqued, mount his high horse and ride away. Howard was not an ordinary man. The mission she intended her letter to fulfil was to kill his love for her outright. Would it do so? She read it through again, and was bound to confess that it was not nearly heartless enough. Indeed it would either have brought him post-haste to her feet or shown him that she was worth waiting years for. She would have to be almost inhuman before she could convince him. To cut his love close until no vestige of it remained would avail nothing. In time it would only grow as thick again. Nothing but the most merciless electrolysis would be of any permanent use. One or two tears splashed down on to the blotting-paper as she tore the sheet in two. It is the unsent letters that make the world's history.

"MY DEAR MR. HOWARD,—I have come to my senses. About time you will think. Please forgive all the rubbish a romantic girl talked this evening. The night air had got into my head. I will not ask you to

allow me to break off our engagement because you always assured me that there was none to break, but I write to tell you that I go home to-morrow to live under my sister's wing, and wish to bury all my childish indiscretions with the dead season. Neither of us will, I daresay, be any the worse for the little flirtation which undoubtedly helped to pass the time very pleasantly. If we happen to meet again some day we shall probably laugh over it with other reminiscences, if, indeed, we have not forgotten it altogether by that time.

"I must thank you very much for all the kindness you have shown me, and wish you the best of luck in your exam.—Yours very sincerely, GREY ALISON."

This to the man whose kisses were still burning her cheek. Of its priggish indifference there could be no doubt. She directed and stamped the envelope, but was not sure even then if she could bring herself to post it. The necessity of packing was, perhaps, the saving of her. At half-past five she rang the upstairs bell. Burton appeared in agitation with a shawl over her night-dress.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Burton, but I'm going home to-day by the ten o'clock train. Will you dress and ask somebody to go round to the mews and order Mr. Howard's horse for me at once?"

"Miss Grey! you've never been to bed. There's nothing the matter, is there?"

"No; I was late in coming home, and I found a letter from Mrs. Beaumont begging me to go home at once, so I amused myself by packing."

Shortly after six Kalifa was led round to the door. Grey stood on the step, to all appearances quite calm, giving further instructions to Burton.

"Ask for the bill, and have the luggage on a cab

by half-past nine. Miss Simmons goes down to Sussex to-day. Help her if you have time. I shall be back in time to change."

The fatal letter was in her covert-coat pocket. She had not been able to summon up courage to slip it into the pillar-box in front of the door. During her ride her mind must be made up one way or the other. The grey was very fresh. For the first few minutes she had her work cut out to keep him in hand. She turned his head towards the Park. A gallop on some common would have been more suited to her frame of mind, but time was short. At all costs she must catch the ten train. The danger of meeting Howard, if she stayed, was too great a risk. She had the Row to herself. The policeman at the corner turned round to watch her. She recognised him, and bade him "Good morning."

"And you must not run me in if I ride recklessly. There's nobody that I could kill except myself."

"I hope you'll not do that, miss."

"I hope not, too."

And she knew that she lied.

Yet at the end of an hour she was a different being. She and Kalifa had come to understand each other so well that she had only to drop the reins on his neck for him to break straightway into a gallop. There was never the motion of a fore-leg to be felt. He seemed to fly through the morning air. She had been wise in her choice of a tonic to brace her for the work in hand. The horse had a queer temper, would throw himself in his box and kick and squeal from sheer anger, yet for herself and Howard he would always do his best, and that best was good.

Grey felt, as she pulled him up at last, with foaming sides, that he could teach her a lesson worth the learning.

She patted his neck and whispered, "And I, too, will do my best for him, Silver King."

From that moment she felt that she had indeed put her hand to the plough, and never looked back. Leaving the Park at the Corner, she asked a crossing-sweeper to post her letter for her. In taking the coppers which she handed to him at the same time, he dropped it face downwards in the gutter.

"Sorry, lady, will it still go?"

The address was smeared, but legible. The temptation to hold out her hand and pocket it was great.

"Yes, it's all right."

She waited till she heard it fall into the box, then rode away.

She went home by Victoria Street. Howard's rooms faced the back, otherwise the risk had been too great, but she saw the door through which he must have passed but seven hours before. He was not an early riser. He would still be within those walls. An untidy servant-girl was scrubbing the steps. Grey would willingly have changed places with her, would, in any case, like to have spoken to her, ugly and slovenly as she was, but instead she urged Kalifa into a trot and hurried home.

The groom was leaning against the area railings. She sent him into the house for sugar. She had taught the grey to push his soft muzzle into her pocket in search of it. To-day, for the first time, he found it empty.

"Poor boy! I'm afraid that I had something else to think of this morning, but wait a minute."

It was getting late, but she waited while he took the lumps gently out of her hand and crunched them at his leisure. Then she flung her arms for the last time round his neck and laid her cheek against his.

"Oh! Kalifa, Kalifa, I wish that I were you!"

It was soon over. In a mist of tears, shed not al-

together for his master, she watched him led away, then went up to her room in a frenzy of impatience to finish the task she had set herself. She had once demurred at the idea of bicycling in a crowded thoroughfare. Her pilot had answered, "Do not look behind you. Keep your eyes fixed steadily on me and you will be all right." She applied his advice now, knowing that it was the only means of saving her from accident. She took a sheet of paper out of her dressing-bag and wrote in a clear hand—

"On my solemn word of honour, I, Grey Alison, hereby promise to devote my life to my sister for so long a time as she shall require me, and never willingly to see or speak to him I love again until my conscience tells me that I am free. If it so happens that he seeks me out, I swear not to show him by word or look or deed what he is to me, being convinced beyond all doubt that it is for his good to forget me. May God in His mercy give me strength to carry out my resolution to the letter, and not cause me to be tempted above that I am able."

She read it over aloud on her knees, kissed her open Bible, then placed it in an envelope between the pages.

As has been said Grey always scorned the idea of a signed pledge as an insult to will-power. Weak-minded people existed, she knew, whose one chance of reform lay in a public declaration attested by witnesses. For such she had always felt a profound pity. If the scourge of drink had come upon her she would have grappled bravely with it after her own fashion, yet this little unofficial document had been drawn up voluntarily for her own satisfaction. No one had forced her hand.

She knew what she was about. She had learnt that there is a power stronger than drink, which once having gained ingress crops up all through life. For nineteen

times that she might overcome it she would be beaten the twentieth and all the good undone. That even on her oath her endurance would be taxed to the utmost. Unaided, she could not so much as have pretended to cope with it. With the written evidence of her renunciation meeting her eye twice a day she would feel secure—in sanctuary.

"Is Mr. Howard coming to see you off?" Miss Simmons asked at breakfast.

"No."

She went to the sideboard and pretended to cut some bread.

"Janet, that little affair is ended. If you don't mind, we won't talk of it."

"Ended! Why, I thought it was only just begun."

"No; begun and ended. A little interlude, an *entracte* which served to fill a space in the programme, that was all"

"I won't mention it, of course, if you don't wish it, but you can't deceive me. Something has happened. I won't ask what, but you see I understand."

Grey knew that she did not really understand the least little bit in the world, but she thanked her bluntly, which was often her way when most moved.

She never spoke during her drive with Burton to King's Cross, but sat immovable, with her hands clasped tightly on her knees, looking out of the window. It was only the horses that she noticed.

After a too short night's rest in stuffy mews, the "living engines" were at work again. Willing 'bus horses, tortured by flies; ex-hunters in cabs, bravely feigning a jaunty air which they could hardly have felt; coster-donkeys, "slack-backed from the weight of other people's burdens." A girl passed them in Oxford Street starting for her morning ride, rising high from the saddle

with cup and ball action ; Grey knew that the horse's back was sore by the way he flinched and hung his head, but he went cheerfully on. " Touch a galled horse on the back and he'll kick." Not always. The philosophy of some is above retaliation. Dumb and uncomplainingly all were doing their duty. Grey felt that she could not be shamed by these poor " whipped tops and bandi'd balls." She had made up her mind to do hers, but she realised now that there were degrees of fulfilling it. Hers should be done in the proper spirit, without grudging. And " a horse is counted but a vain thing to save a man."

CHAPTER XIV.

Some little talk awhile of me and thee there was,
And then no more of thee and me.

—RUBAIYÁT.

ABOUT six o'clock that evening Howard returned to Victoria Street after his day's work.

He ran upstairs with the vigour of an emancipated schoolboy, and flung his books on the table in the sitting-room. There was no gainsaying its plebeian origin. The whole house had been apartments for generations; this little flat was an offshoot of the parent stem. A woman's taste would have served only as a perishable veneer to the rough surface, but Howard with little leisure for its arrangement had made it very comfortable. It was essentially a man's room, as the Tantalus stand and a regiment of empty cigarette-tins on the mantelpiece denoted, but he had stipulated for a piano and the window-box was bright with flowers. A miniature of his wife stood on the writing-table, but he had not so much as an amateur photograph of Grey in his possession. He had never asked her for one. They seemed to him to be invented for those whose memories fade like themselves, yet there was much within those walls to remind him of her. An old copy of Lindsay Gordon's poems he had held doubly dear since he discovered that she, too, knew the greater part of them by heart, and most of the songs on the piano, by some

strange chance, she had had bound in her Treasury before ever she met him.

Once or twice Miss Simmons had brought her to tea there, and the stuffy den over the "mews," as he was accustomed to call it, had been hallowed ever since.

He noticed a letter in her hand-writing as he opened the door, also some library books which he had lent her. He was pressed for time, but he decided to ring for a cup of tea and allow himself a quarter of an hour's rest before his evening reading. After that he hoped to go and see her, but it depended upon the receptive power of his brain. Grey was never exacting. She had never once asked him to put his work on one side however much she wanted to see him.

He had always held that the woman who openly shows distaste for anything connected with her husband's business or occupation is best unmarried. He had given up the Navy to please his wife, but the sacrifice had not bound them closer.

He was in the act of stretching across the table to reach the letter when a dull thud against the window made him look up. He crossed the room, threw up the sash and looked out. On the cobble-stones on the mews below a sparrow lay either stunned or dead. It had been attracted by the reflection of the sun on the glass, and been beaten back like many another in its effort to reach the light. He hesitated for a moment. To examine it he would have to go out of the front door and round by the end of the street. There was no lift and he was very hot. Besides, the bird did not move, and he was, at best, only a London sparrow, with every man's hand against him. He loathed himself the next moment for the mere thought, and pictured Grey's disgust if she could have known. Only that morning he had reprimanded a man for driving a lame

horse. Which was worse? he asked himself—the man using a horse unfit for work because he could not afford to hire another, or himself, too lazy to walk a couple of hundred yards to ascertain the damage done to a bird?

He snatched up his hat and ran downstairs. When he reached the mews he found that the sparrow was alive and more dazed than hurt. He made an ambulance of his handkerchief, and carried it indoors. A drink was the next thing. He fetched a glass from the sideboard, unlocked the Tantalus, and poured out a drop of brandy. By means of a new quill pen the patient was rendered lively, even intoxicated.

Howard put him amongst the lobelia in the window-box, and had the satisfaction of seeing him fly away as if nothing untoward had happened. The whole incident had not lasted a quarter of an hour, and but for Grey his indolence might have mastered him. "Bless her! how she helps me," he thought, and then opened her letter. He read it twice, three times, then put it on the table, and pressed his hands against his temples that he might think the better.

Why had she done it? was his first thought. That she loved him he never doubted for a moment. She had been almost hysterical in the cab, and let herself go in a way which he had imagined impossible to her, and he had been glad of it. The pure passion of a good woman he knew to be worth anything, for it can keep a man. Without it she is not on his plane, is an ethereal being, set on a pedestal to be worshipped like a beautiful statue, but not taken into his life. A cathedral choir with its picked voices may fill the heart with wonder, but the wish to join in the service is only natural. Her antitype is equally undesirable as a helpmeet. Her short reign a dream of perfect bliss while it lasts, but quickly over. An incorruptible amalgam of flesh and marble he had

imagined existed, but he had not hoped for the good luck to find it. And now that the treasure trove was to be taken away from him, he was not surprised. It had always seemed a priceless possession to which he had no claim. He determined to give it up without resistance, to be thankful only for the joy of temporary ownership.

It never occurred to him to reproach Grey. He only continued to wonder what had happened to cause her unexpected decision. If more time had elapsed he would have thought there was some one else, but there was evidence that she had gone straight home and written to him. She spoke of "this evening" not "last night" even. His thoughts went back to the dinner—Guy Stapleton. He seemed to see the truth in a flash. Many a girl years older than Grey had had her head turned by the handsome Guardsman, and with less cause. A few platitudes uttered in a *blasé* drawl had often been sufficient to do the mischief.

The women had themselves to thank for his bad manners. Last night the tables had been turned. The spoilt beauty man had been undoubtedly impressed by the plucky little being who had audaciously taken him to task for his short-comings.

Howard remembered Grey's unusual silence while driving home and her subsequent plea for Stapleton's rudeness. He tortured himself with thoughts of pity and his brother love. The skein was no longer tangled. He found himself unwinding it easily with never a knot to hinder him. Grey's feelings for him had not undergone a sudden change. She had wished to be true to herself, and bravely urged on the marriage, knowing all the time that the other man would have pleased her best. Poor little Grey! He would not make things harder for her. On the contrary, he would help her to

the best of his ability. Stapleton was not quite his sort. They had never seen much of each other or had a great deal in common, but that was probably his fault. He believed him to be made of the right stuff at heart. The shock was not so very great, he told himself. From the first his insane happiness had seemed too good to be true. It was not as if he had ever felt sure of her being really his. Years before he had resigned himself to the knowledge that love as he imagined it was not for him. It had a way of coming very near him and then passing him by.

He was not surprised. He had often asked himself what Grey could possibly see in him. The reason he now knew to be lack of competition. A row over is poor sport to all concerned, but he had met more than his match at last.

He supposed that he had better write to her. After some deliberation he decided to send just three words, "As you will." He had doubts about hiding his feelings in a letter. He neither wished her to think that he cared, nor that he did not.

He remembered that he was not sure of her address. He looked it up in Burke, and took the letter to the post himself. After that he found himself at the Guards' Club. It was nearly eight o'clock and he was in morning dress, but there was just the chance that he might find the man of all others whom he most wished to see. The hall-porter told him that Captain Stapleton was in the reading-room. A waiter was sent in search of him. He came out hurriedly.

"Hallo, Howard! Do you want me?"

"I just happened to be passing, and thought that I would look you up. Come and dine with me somewhere where wedding-garments are the exception."

"All right. I'm dead beat. Been shopping all day. Going out of Town to-morrow."

Howard could not help asking, "North?"

"No, Exmoor, on Miss Alison's recommendation."

"You have seen her to-day?"

"Oh, no! Don't suppose I shall ever see her again, unless you arrange a meeting for us."

"I am not Miss Alison's agent."

"I thought you were. She led me to understand so last night."

"You are mistaken. There is nothing between us, nothing. You are free to go in and win as far as I am concerned."

"No, thanks. She hit me rather hard, I confess; but life's too short to attempt to make the running with a woman who doesn't try to conceal that she cares for another man. I can always tell at the end of half an hour's conversation whether I can make a woman love me. It's rather a saving of labour."

"And you are still convinced that Miss Alison could never care for you?"

"Absolutely. You see, she told me so herself in as many words."

"You don't mean to say that you ——"

"Yes; I don't know what it is about that girl, but she struck me as being worth any amount of trouble and humiliation."

"But she can't have told you that she cared for anybody else—for me, because she doesn't."

"No, she didn't; but I saw the look she gave you when the ladies left the dining-room. You can't have forgotten it. No man could."

So it was not Stapleton. Grey's interest in him had been merely the kindly feeling which every nice woman must feel for a disappointed lover. The knowledge

hardly mended matters, but at any rate they were no worse. Suspicion had not been cemented by conviction. Howard came to the conclusion that Stapleton had been maligned. He was a real good fellow. The two men spent the evening together, and parted with mutual regret.

Howard did not read his accustomed hour that night. He lost himself in a brown study with the book before him for twice that time. As the outcome he told himself that he could never forget Grey, but all his will-power should be concentrated in the aim to bear the news of her marriage to some one else with resignation.

Further north, another brain was already bravely striving for the same end.

CHAPTER XV.

He that should pretend to teach a madman how to speak, walk and behave himself, were not he the madder man of the two?

—SENECA.

ONLY old Samuels, the coachman, with the omnibus met Grey at the station. No one else, and she was rather disappointed. The welcoming and speeding of guests, the endeavour to see the first and last of them when possible, count for much in the north. Grey had not expected Firenze, but she thought that Edward, perhaps, would be there.

She patted the horses, and, taking the reins, clambered up on to the box-seat. Samuels at her side talked incessantly. No detail of stable life in the past had ever been too trivial to interest Miss Grey. The accumulated record of four months kept him employed till they left the straight coaching road and turned into the narrow lane leading to the hamlet of Blossom Green. Grey's heart gave a series of bounds as she recognised the familiar landmarks. Nothing was really altered. Busy harvesters were at work amongst the golden corn. When she left, the hay had been still standing. The sunburnt cheeks of gaudy apples appeared in the wayside gardens *vice* the youthful pink and white blossom, but these changes she had expected. There were no gaps. That was what gladdened her heart. None of the

villagers curtseying at their cottage doors looked a day older. Time seemed to have stood still to wait for them, but he had seized her by the hand and had dragged her after him at full speed. They were very nearly home now. Samuels stretched behind her and put on the brake. Just beyond the cross-roads where the Harebell and the blacksmith's shop stood was the lane leading up to the house.

When she went away the hunters had been turned out in the grass fields on either side, and had galloped after the carriage as far as the corner. Now they were gone. The long vacation was over. Grey made the horses walk up the hill leading to the house. It was often a temptation to spring it, but she had theories about bringing them in cool.

The sight of the tiny church sent a sharp stab through her heart. She had always loved it, and lately had both thought and talked of it in connection with her wedding-day. Immediately beyond was the house itself. There was no lodge. The wooden gate stood hospitably open all the year round.

Grey's spirits rose again. Her home had never looked better. The red blinds against the stonework were as pleasing to her eye as a pink coat on a grey horse. She glanced at the windows of the Rose Room and saw that her seat had not been usurped. It was empty. Not so much as a peeping housemaid to be seen anywhere, but on the flight of steps before the front door a deputation of dogs awaited her.

Bogie rushed towards her before she spoke to him, jumped against the spokes of the wheel in his efforts to reach her, and even the strangers, compelled by the feeling of freemasonry existing between Grey and all animals, took her future friendship on trust and wagged their tails in welcome. Enderby, getting into his coat

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with the action of a hen stretching, appeared through the swing-door as Grey crossed the hall. His "Glad to see you back, miss," was nice to hear.

She went into the library which Edward had made his own, and where Firenze spent much of her time. It was empty, but a pile of letters showed that the master of the house had been there recently. The room was lived in, but it was not as she wished to see it. Judging from the heap of newspapers, they had been allowed to accumulate ever since she had gone away. From the windows overlooking the garden bright borders were to be seen, but all the vases were empty. She could understand that poor Firenze would not feel inclined to be worried by household matters just then, but she wondered that the servants should be so slack. It had never struck her that the best of them work better for a mistress who takes an interest in them.

She was still looking round her in consternation when Beaumont came in.

"Hallo, I didn't know that you had arrived. I have been sitting with Firenze, and her room faces the other way."

"She is not well, then?"

"She has been very bad; in bed since Tuesday."

"I must go to her; no, don't come. I know the room you mean."

She could not bear the idea of his following her. In the moment for which she had been longing he would be out of place. Even Firenze would wish only for her, when she told her the good news again by word of mouth.

She ran upstairs and stopped at the door of the large spare room which, with its old oak furniture and view of the moat, had always seemed wasted on occasional guests. She knocked lightly, then went in, peeping

round the screen which stood between her and the four-poster. Firenze was lying awake with her face towards her.

"So you have come at last?"

Grey's tender words of greeting froze on her lips.

"I couldn't come any quicker, your letter only arrived last night. I had to pack instead of going to bed. Can I stay and talk to you?"

"No, for goodness' sake leave me! They bother me to death, all of them. First Ernestine comes with soup, and then Edward wants to bathe my forehead with *eau de Cologne*. Can't you let me sleep in peace?"

She turned over, and Grey went away sick at heart. Bogie was waiting for her on the mat. He followed her down to the library. Once again it was empty. In the housekeeper's room she would be sure of a welcome. She hurried away, then half-way down the back-stairs stopped. Peals of domestic laughter rang through the stone passages. Burton was apparently serving out to her rural colleagues at the tea-table portions of the urban *olla-podrida* with which her mind was filled.

Grey did not like to go to the stables; the men would be busy washing the horses. In her own room she might, perhaps, feel more at home. She looked in at the Rose Room on her way to the top landing, and wished that she had passed it by. A summer garden rifled by a destructive storm is a sad sight. It smelt of brandy, this feminine sanctum which had never been licensed to hold anything stronger than coffee. The windows were locked and opened stiffly. Unmounted photographs strewn the step in the alcove, and a jar of mouldy paste had stuck to one of the Chippendale tables. She hurried away in disgust to her room. It was out of Firenze's beat, and much as she had left it. She was glad to see flowers on the writing-table. Only purple asters

and red dahlias on two-inch stalks, but they showed her that at least one soul in the house was glad of her coming, either a maid or Mrs. Hunter.

Dinner was a depressing meal. Beaumont was silent and preoccupied, and when the servants were out of the room did not exert himself to talk at all. Afterwards he read his *Times* in the library, and Grey sat by the open window, her arms clasped round Bogie's neck. At half-past nine Beaumont went to bed.

"You don't mind my leaving you, Grey, but she won't settle off to sleep till I go up?"

The next morning Howard's answer to her letter came. Short as a receipted bill, and many degrees less welcome. She did not quite know what to make of it. He had not meant it to be an enigma, but the motive in which a letter is written counts for little compared with the construction which the reader puts upon it. Patient submission, curt acquiescence, injured pride, were all likely interpretations of the three monosyllables. It was impossible to judge a man's state of mind accurately at the first guess. Yet something told her all the time that, as usual, he had proved himself willing for her to do as she pleased with him. She would like to have known for certain all the same. The "I thought you would know," heard sometimes at first-hand in after life, circumstance more often withholds.

Everything was ended between them. That was certain. She had wished it, yet half-feared, half-hoped that he would appeal for a remand. It was best as it was. Until his reply had come she could not have settled to the new life. Now that the matter was finally wound up she was free beyond dispute to place herself in her sister's hands without encumbrance.

Beaumont seemed in better spirits when he came down to breakfast, but he did not pay much attention to

his sister-in-law. Except on hunting-days, his world held nobody but his wife. She had had a good night, and was more like herself, he told Grey. He hoped that she would go to her as soon as she had finished her breakfast, and be as merry as possible. She crushed her letter tightly in her hand, and promised that she would. She spent the morning in Firenze's room with the exception of a short interval when she went into the kitchen to order the meals. It was then that she summoned up courage to throw her last tangible memory of Howard into the fire.

The sisters talked till luncheon-time, but Firenze never touched once upon the subject of all others which Grey felt she must have most at heart. Neither on that nor on the other sad topic, but chiefly on clothes.

After a *little-à-little* luncheon with Beaumont Grey had a short time to herself, while Firenze was leisurely dressed by Ernestine. She spent part of it in the stables, then rushed up through the woods to the top of the hill for a breath of fresh air. She hurried back to find Firenze on a deck-chair under the trees on the lawn, perfectly happy, with a book which she did not read. Tea was brought there and then; just as the post was going Firenze had half a dozen notes for her to write against time. This was a sample of her day's work during her favourite month of September, which she was accustomed to spend out of doors, laying in a store of fresh air against the coming of winter. She was hardly allowed time for her own correspondence, needlework or music. Even the housekeeping would have been sadly neglected if she had not insisted on looking into things thoroughly.

Sometimes Firenze went for a drive, but she would never call on her old friends, and, if they came to see her, they were not admitted. It had been an under-

stood thing in the past that any one coming from a distance should put up their horses and rest, whether the girls were in or not. Enderby could hardly bring himself to utter the words, "Not at home." His house had always had such a good name for hospitality. It never seemed to strike Firenze that Grey might occasionally like to see some young people. "We don't want anybody, do we?" she would say at luncheon. "Certainly not, if you don't wish it, darling," would be Beaumont's answer, and Grey would add a half-hearted negative. At first she had been gladly willing to forego all society for the sake of the interesting invalid. Then a day came when she met Dr. Hewitt by chance in the lane. He had raised his eye-brows in surprise when she had let fall some remark of which the meaning was unmistakable. "No, I'm afraid that there's no longer any chance of that," the old man had said, shaking his head. "It would be the best thing that could happen to the poor child, but she herself by her intemperate habits has put such a possibility out of the question, for the present at any rate." So sometimes, the glamour of the situation having vanished, visitors were let in through little ruses of Grey's. She was not altogether above them, knowing now that only laziness prevented her sister from entertaining, and as far as it lay in her power she always encouraged the callers to come again.

There was nobody living that she particularly wished to see, but she knew that the exertion of talking to people was good for her. It was the long unbroken spells of her own society that were doing her so much harm and rusting her patience. The feeling that Firenze might peremptorily send for her at any moment prevented her from taking up anything seriously. Minutes often grew into hours and found her still waiting, but the knowledge that she was supposed to be

constantly at her sister's beck and call spirited away application. Many of the local busybodies wondered why she did not devote her time to some particular accomplishment. One girl in the neighbourhood made quite a nice sum by book-binding; the music of another gave great pleasure. Grey Alison, they knew, had a sweet little voice which only needed training. She had proved herself an excellent accompanist at village concerts, and had taken the first prize in a private essay club. Yet she did nothing. Simply hunted and cycled and frittered away her life. Some little bird told Grey of their comments. She wondered if those among her contemporaries who rode their poor hobbies to death in moments of sudden inspiration knew anything of the tedium of exercising a carriage-horse day by day along the same road.

She began slowly to lose all interest in her surroundings. Even hunting now seemed to her the least irksome of life's misnamed pleasures instead of its greatest delight. But the sense of progress in some one thing did her undoubted good. Youth will out under any auspices. Small blame to it that it likes to see the immediate result of labour without protracted waiting. The young man who plants saplings for the benefit of his grandchildren is not easily found. He would rather be put to the trouble and expense of transplanting a large tree and enjoy its shade in his lifetime. On the same principle Grey modelled her daily routine, eagerly expecting evidence of her patience and self-sacrifice with the eagerness of a child watching for the first blades of its forced mustard and cress. Often she was bitterly disappointed and sceptical of doing any good whatsoever. Beaumont cheered her to the best of his ability. It was not possible, he told her, that the two beings whom Firenze loved most in the world should give her

the best of head and heart in vain. Hers was too sweet a nature to prove susceptible only to evil. In time their work would bear fruit. Grey hoped so, but she knew that Edward had never as yet seen his wife at her worst. She had spared him the sight as much as possible, for with each fresh bout the beast in Firenze gained on the woman in giant strides. Sense of shame seemed deadened. It became the exception for her to speak the truth. In the fits of depression following each outbreak all manner of abusive epithets were hurled at Grey. For the least thing that went wrong in the house she was loudly rated by the woman who never put a hand's turn to anything. Yet she still possessed sufficient policy to appear sweet as sugar to her husband, to wheedle him into promising that he would not send her away. In such times as these she also did much to turning him against Grey, telling him long stories of her harshness and ill-temper, which did not tend to smooth matters between the two who were of necessity thrown so much together.

In this hell upon earth Gladys' letters were the only pleasure. The coloured envelopes which at erratic intervals adorned her plate at breakfast were the sole remaining thread-ends of an unpicked past. Howard was always mentioned. Beyond the mere fact of the rupture between the two Gladys knew nothing, but neither had proved unwilling to hear of the other. So Grey learnt in due time that Howard had not only passed his examination, but been appointed to a secretaryship and taken up his new work in White-hall; sometimes that he was looking thin, sometimes well. Accounts of Grey varied according to Gladys' ideas of what her cousin might wish her to say. On occasion she seemed dull and eager for news from the south, but when a fellow-feeling of pride stepped in

she was enjoying the hunting beyond measure. So Howard hardly knew what to think of her, or she of him.

Grey, for her part, did not altogether lose heart. At eighteen the tendency is to look upon life as a story-book; a happy ending protracted, but inevitable. She had her good days, for the blast must be very biting to kill the confident spring flowers outright.

It was remembered afterwards that she never complained nor railed at her lot. She knew that rain must fall into every life, that too much sun brings drought, that the surest way to warm one's hands is to plunge them into snow, and with such simple philosophy she comforted herself and sat down meekly to catch what goods Fate might throw to her, bravely hoping like Thoreau that "perhaps the south wind might blow." It is said that no fatalist has ever become noteworthy. Not the weak aimless being, who prefers to drift with the stream and cannot be at the trouble to offer resistance; but what of the strong who, knowing his power, thinks fit to submit to the lightest bit and bridle? Out of such stuff heroes are made, and this sort of patience is not passive but "concentrated strength."

CHAPTER XVI.

A woman of the world . . .
 . . . Who has wheeled on her own pivot half a life.
 If she loves at last her love's a readjustment of self-love.
 —AURORA LEIGH.

MAN'S love is undoubtedly a thing apart from his work. It is possible for him to become absorbed in it for its own sake without any ulterior motive in the background. A woman may devote herself with equal zest to the art or craft she undertakes, but she plays all the time to the one being which she has picked out for herself. With her, head and heart cannot act independently. Howard's love for Grey was by no means lessened by the intense interest of his new appointment. He congratulated himself a hundred times a day that his post was too responsible an one to admit of any shirking or half-heartedness on his part. His brain power was taxed to the utmost. At times he had hardly leisure for sleep, still less for brooding. The Sundays were what he dreaded most, yet not so long ago it had been the day he liked best. Often he and Grey and Miss Simmons had gone to the ten o'clock service at the Abbey, and then driven to Paddington and spent the afternoon on the Thames. Now he no longer cared for the river. He had, of his own accord, dropped out of Society as much as possible, and books and music, once his greatest joy, gave him untold pain. From force of habit he would in the first days of his bereavement underline a sentence

for Grey's guidance, and an organ recital at the Albert Hall the same week seemed to him only a *résumé* of all that she had taught him in the past.

Exactly a year after the time that he had spoken to her of his love, in the following July that is, he wrote to her. She was nineteen. There was just the chance that she might have tired of gaiety, that after all he might be still first in the field. The question was worth asking at any rate. He had always told her that he would speak again at the expiration of the year, and in spite of all that had passed she might still expect him to keep his word.

His note to her was short, and in no wise obtrusive. He had every right to ask her to marry him, for so far as the world knew she was still free. It was an open race. Her answer was equally short. She was very sorry, but she was still of the same mind. It conveyed a sense of perfect content with her lot, and pity for his. Pity, she knew, was what he could not stand. To be beholden to anybody for anything, even kindly feeling, went sadly against the grain with him. He determined to come out of his shell, to go out into the world that she might hear and read of him enjoying life as much as she. He burnt her note before he had time to realise that he wanted to keep it, and went to call on Mrs. Copley. He had seen her but twice in the last year. Once when he called after the memorable dinner and again by chance in Bond Street.

She was sitting alone in her drawing-room when he was announced. In her surprise and delight at seeing him she called him by his Christian name. The sound did not grate on his ear as it might have done. She was beautifully dressed and the sense of repose about her struck him more than ever when he found her resting quietly in the cool room amongst masses of the

flowers which she as much as any one had taught him to love two years before.

"Charlie! is it you or your wraith?"

"I am not certain, Queen Mab. The heat and hard work between them have left little of me that is tangible."

"You will have some tea?"

"Yes. It is half-past six, and the servants will hate me, but I will have some if only for the pleasure of seeing your silver and china once again. My landlady's royal-blue tea-pot covered with a rash of white blossom is the eighth wonder of the world."

"And you might buy a nice brown one for a couple of shillings."

"I know, but we men are such idiots. There are lots of things within our reach which we might have without any trouble, and yet we don't lift a finger to get them, so I don't deserve sympathy, do I?"

"No, and I'm not going to give you any. Don't get up. You are going to be waited on because you are so helpless, for a treat."

"It is a treat."

He lay back in his chair, and she placed everything that he might want near him. Tea, cakes, cigarettes, matches and herself.

"Will you come and dine?"

"Yes, if you will have me."

She was engaged to go to a large dinner, the only one to which she had looked forward that season, for every guest was picked for his or her mental worth irrespective of convention or marital ties. But she knew that in London, above all places, if one does not strike while the iron is hot opportunity is apt to be jostled into a corner.

"It will be a charity to cheer my loneliness. Go away and dress, and I will order an extra crust."

She had told the servants that she was dining-out, and they had made their plans accordingly. Now, at seven o'clock, the cook was asked to produce by hook or by crook a miniature banquet for two.

By means of hansoms and special messengers the crusts were served at half-past eight, and the hostess had slipped into an alluring twenty-guinea maize rag.

A couple of flights of stairs led from the inner hall to the dining-room. The memory of that other night a year ago, when they had entered it through the studio, refused to be banished, but Howard was too tired and hungry to allow it to spoil his dinner. Mrs. Copley had no appetite, but she ate with apparent heartiness, remembering that Howard had once told her that a woman to be good company ought to enjoy her food as much as a man. Afterwards they found cigarettes and a spirit-lamp in the dimly-lighted studio. She bade him talk while she made him his coffee in true Turkish fashion. Curiosity at last proved too much for her.

"What has happened to your pretty little Yorkshire friend?"

"Oh, she went back to her native heath months ago. I have not seen her since."

Life looked very bright to Mrs. Copley at that moment. Every jet of light seemed turned on full. She felt almost dazzled.

"I'm surprised. I thought that you were on the verge of becoming engaged to her last year."

"Really? We were very good friends. She was certainly pretty, and so keen about everything, and I think that I was of some use in showing her round."

He spoke of her in the past tense. A hopeful sign.

Mrs. Copley moved a little closer to him on the divan, and laid her hand on his.

"Oh, Charlie! I'm so glad that there is nothing in it. If there had been I should not have known what to do for the best. Perhaps you know already what I have to tell you?"

He shook his head.

"I have just got a new house-maid. She lived with the Alisons. She told my maid that Miss Alison — drinks."

Howard sprang to his feet. The Sèvres coffee-cup smashed to atoms on the floor.

"Drinks? That child! To what gross fabrications have you been listening? Don't you know that half the servants who cannot get satisfactory characters from their mistresses say that of them? It is an old trick."

"I'm afraid that this girl's story is but too true. She seems so distressed about it. She was so fond of her young mistress."

"I don't believe it. Why, she would hardly ever touch wine even when she was dead tired. We had quite a little tiff at a dance, I remember, because she would not take a glass of champagne."

"That, I fear, must count for nothing. Often the women who drink are practically teetotallers in public. They keep contraband stores instead."

"You will never convince me, never."

He stamped his foot.

"You have not forgotten the girl, I daresay. Can you recall her clear complexion and bright, healthy face and entertain such horrible suspicions for a moment?"

"Yes, I am afraid that I can. A couple of years ago I would have sided with you, but, unfortunately, I have learnt something of this terrible vice since then. It takes years of hard drinking before a woman's complexion

really suffers. When I say hard I mean a bottle of brandy a day while the fit lasts."

Howard laughed.

"Am I to take you in earnest or are you sure that your own excellent Chablis has not gone to your head?"

"My dear boy, I was just as sceptical as you when I first learnt something of what drink means to a woman. Believe me or not, as you will. I can only tell you that ten empty bottles were found hidden in Miss Alison's room in one week. Would you like to see the maid yourself?"

The question was put eagerly. She had no fear that the girl would play her false. She had foreseen the chance that some day a little distorted evidence would be required of her and had paid heavily for the exclusive rights. The look that he gave her showed her her mistake.

"No, thanks, and I think that I'll say good-night. I'll never believe a word of this vile slander. You have been sadly misled, I am convinced, and as Miss Alison was a great friend of mine, I'm sure that you won't be surprised that all this has rather upset me."

Mrs. Copley burst into tears.

"Don't be so angry with me. I can't bear it. I could not help telling you. Even if you had cared for her, I think that I should have told you. You could not have married a drunken wife. No man would if he knew of the lying and deception and misery it means. I would rather see you put a bullet through your head."

"It's not your fault. I'm not blaming you. You merely repeated that woman's tittle-tattle. Come, don't cry, it's not becoming."

She had flattered herself that it was, but seeing that tears did not lessen the distance between them she dabbed her eyes and sat upright to find that he had left her.

He walked away from the house like one possessed. How dared any living soul expose such a strong-minded innocent little woman as Grey to such base calumny? He was almost beside himself with indignation. Even if he had not loved her, he could not have borne to hear her so cruelly maligned. As it was, he had no word harsh enough to condemn the originator of the story. By the time that he reached Victoria Street the fresh air had somewhat sobered his heated brain. In his room he lit a cigarette and tried to think over the matter impartially.

There was no smoke without fire. He had not seen Grey for a year. Was it possible, by any means, that since they had parted she had developed a taste for wine or spirits? That she had never had the slightest craving for it before was certain. If she had she would have begged him to help her he was convinced. His thoughts went back to the Wandsworth dance. He remembered for the first time how strangely her manner had altered after supper, that she had become suddenly morose from the time when he pressed champagne upon her. Had he unconsciously been her tempter? Had the longing for it been on her then that she refused it so emphatically? That she had not succumbed he could swear. Her speech and manner would instantly have betrayed her. She was not excitable by nature; always calm and self-possessed. No, not quite always. He could recall one instance when she had been quite different from what he had ever seen her before—the night when she dined with him at Mrs. Copley's. Happiness had intoxicated her that night, not wine; but could he prove that? She had been almost hysterical in the cab, and that very same evening she had written to him, almost apologetically, ending their engagement and affirming that the night air had gone to her head.

The night air! the night air!

And if it were true she had been bravely battling alone with this great fiend ever since, determined to give him up when she most needed him. Yet she had done right, for under such terrible circumstances she ought not to marry. He had seen too much misery brought about in the tropics by constant recourse of both men and women to "pegs" to doubt that Mrs. Copley had exaggerated when she told him that he might as well go and shoot himself as attempt life with a dipsomaniac. He would go north at once and set his mind at rest. It could not be true. Even although it might be difficult to reconcile certain undisputed facts, he was certain that it was impossible. He must start for Yorkshire immediately.

Taking the gloomiest view of the case for the sake of argument he felt that, should there be the smallest foundation for suspicion, he might be the only living being who could eradicate the first seeds of the disease and cure her. Then they might marry. He found great consolation in the thought that were this awful possibility correct he had the answer to her unaccountable behaviour. She still cared for him, and there was no other man in the case. She had deliberately given him up for his own good as he might have known that she would. Contradiction trod on the heels of conviction. She had talked well that last night. She was excited but distinctly clear-headed. As a fresh form of torture he remembered that an eminent doctor had told him once that that is a sign which never fails to mislead the amateur, but to which the professional man pays no heed. A woman can be quite brilliant under the influence of drink.

He crept to bed in the small hours of the morning and fell asleep over Bradshaw.

CHAPTER XVII.

Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.

—EMERSON.

"GREY, I think that I should be happier if I turned religious; High Church, I mean. I can't stand the services here, but I could drive in to St. Cuthbert's. There's a beautiful organ there and incense and acolytes, and Father Daniels is such a splendid-looking man. Don't you think yourself that it would be a good idea?"

"Try it, by all means, if you like, but to tell you the truth that sort of thing doesn't strike me as being true religion. The class of women that fill St. Cuthbert's as a rule do not differ much from those who love an unhealthy atmosphere of theatrical glamour, and make fools of themselves over popular actors. Some of them are in earnest, I daresay, but I should think far more of you if you would go regularly to church at Shallowbeck or here. The Vicar's delivery is certainly not pleasing, but, after all, he is only a mouthpiece and he is far more genuine than Father Daniels."

"You are always such a wet blanket. I've no patience with you. If it would make me happier to go to St. Cuthbert's, you ought to be only too glad to encourage the idea."

"It would not make you any happier after the novelty had worn off. It is from one's soul that happiness radiates, and fond of my church as I am, I would rather see you a strong-minded atheist determined to conquer

yourself than casting about in search of new sites on which to build your self-made unhappiness. Any earnest religion is good, and do not imagine that there is any which would uphold your sin or make allowances for it. On the contrary, in almost all but ours fasting is compulsory. It always strikes me as being one of our privileges that we may do it voluntarily if we wish. Come, don't worry your head with anything fresh, but promise me that you will make another start. You swore to me last time that you would be better."

"And I am better. Why, you yourself congratulated me after dinner last night on being so much more like my old self."

Grey raised her eye-brows and looked at her. Up to a point her words were true. She had looked her best at dinner, in a new dress, and had kept the other two amused and cheerful throughout the meal. Afterwards in the Rose Room Grey had taken her aside and told her what a treat it was to her and Edward to see her like that. She had spoken too soon, for even while Grey sang some of her favourite songs out of the fulness of her heart Firenze had slipped down to the dining-room and finished a bottle of port which she found in the cellar-ette.

Now, at noon the next day, she had not recovered from its effects and had reached the argumentative stage which always taxed Grey's patience so sorely. She was likely to ramble on for another hour or so quite incapable of talking sense. The atmosphere of the bedroom was hot and stuffy. After a long siege of the closed shutters the July sun had at last gained an entrance, and Grey saw no chance of escape. Up to then she had always been strangely gentle with her sister, never allowing her to guess how she loathed the life she led. She decided now that it might be better to try another tack, to appeal

to such love as Firenze might still have for her. Experience told her that it could not be much. If she had known when she signed the paper which was to bind them together for life how little, she knew that she could never have done it.

She went and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What's the use of trying to keep up the farce before me? You were better last night than you had been for weeks until you went and spoilt it all. Something must be done. Do you know that you are killing yourself? Dr. Hewitt came to me in great distress this morning. He says that if you don't stop soon your liver will be entirely destroyed. You know as well as I that it is the liver diseases which paint the world black. He gave me these recipes of champagne and port. They are genuine, not dressed-up bogies to frighten you. Even supposing that you always drink the best champagne, and as there is more sold and drunk in New York alone than is manufactured of the pure article in the whole world, it seems unlikely. This is it: 'Fifty gallons of water, two gallons of honey, five ounces of bruised ginger, five ounces of ground mustard. Add a quart of yeast, six ounces of bitter almonds: spirits and grains of paradise to suit convenience.' This unwholesome mess is the powerful magnet which attracts mankind to dinner-parties, and without which the poorer man feels he ought not to entertain."

"I don't see what this has to do with me. You know I hardly ever touch champagne. This cellar has always been considered above reproach. Besides, good old port is what I like."

"Here you are, then: 'Twenty gallons of cider, two gallons of honey, twelve ounces of carbonate of soda, a gallon and a half of strong tincture of grains of paradise, five ounces of powdered catechu. Colour with

logwood or burnt sugar. A small portion of spirit improves it. The carbonate of soda is to neutralise the acid in the cider, which, if allowed to remain, would present too large a proportion of acid in good port.' Not much of the pure juice of the grape about that, is there?"

"It was the staple drink of our grandfathers at any rate. I suppose that you will not deny the superiority of the English race?"

"Most certainly, when I see poor gouty, helpless objects suffering agonies either for their own youthful excesses or those of their ancestors. And remember that your three-bottle men half lived in the saddle and took constant exercise to counteract the effects of the wine. You take no exercise, and you drink far more than the average man."

"Oh! do go away and let me get up. I'm so sick of your everlasting preaching. It does no good. Why won't you leave me alone?"

"You can end it. Oh! won't you pull yourself together for my sake if not for Edward's? You can hardly suppose that I enjoy the life here."

"Well, I do like that. Here you are your own mistress in the old home which you profess to worship, with a couple of horses, plenty of money, and nothing on earth to worry you except my little failing in which you are pleased to take such a lively interest. And then you actually say that you are not happy. Why, what more do you want?"

"A little love in life. If only you still cared for me as you used to do, I could be content. I should feel that I was of some use to you. As it is, I am no good to anybody. My friends hardly ever come to see me because I am never free to see them. I have dropped out of invitations, and could not accept them if they came. As for the horses they are kept chiefly for the benefit

of the grooms, for I rarely get half a day off. During the hours and hours when I am thrown on my own hateful society there is never anything to show for it. There is nothing thorough in anything I undertake. I am neither a good outdoor nor indoor girl. My life is just wasted."

"You are a good prig, at any rate, to make one a present and then send in the bill."

Grey felt, as often happens, that in being outspoken she had done more harm than good. She had meant, in drawing a picture of her lot, to bring home to Firenze the havoc she was working around her and stimulate her to better things, but she had failed signally.

"And I think you'd better go, Grey. I am sure that Ted and I would be happier by ourselves. You have made mischief between us. He treats me quite differently from what he used to."

"How dare you say such a thing, how dare you? Edward does not know half that you do and say. If he did I could quite imagine that he could not feel the same towards you. Even with the half knowledge he looks prematurely old and broken-down."

"And you pity him first and make love to him after. I know you. The only time that you are ever cheerful is when you have been out hunting with him. Do you think that I haven't noticed?"

"Are you mad?"

"Yes, mad with love or hate. They are the same thing. I hate you! Do you hear? You poisonous little viper! I hate you!"

She sat up in bed and struck Grey on the brow with her closed fist.

Beaumont going into the room at lunch-time found his sister-in-law lying senseless on the floor and his wife peacefully sleeping.

CHAPTER XVIII.

And here, where Slander's spawn is spilt,
 And gabbling gossip clucks above
 Her fetid eggs, it feels like guilt
 To know that far away my love
 Her heart on every heartless hour
 Is haply bruising for my sake ;
 While numb and dumb and void of power
 My life sleeps like a winter snake.

—OWEN MEREDITH.

AT sundown, nearly a week later, Howard arrived at the Harebell after a nine mile cycle ride from North Appleton. He determined that it was best not to travel the whole way by rail. From Grey's accounts the station was so primitive that no human being could have alighted unnoticed. She herself might have been on the platform, and he hardly knew yet whether a sudden meeting would be advisable. Cyclists, on the contrary, were indigenous. The whole country-side was so familiar to him from her description that finger-posts were almost superfluities. During the last few miles of the way he did not even trouble to make assurance doubly sure by reading them. He knew exactly where to look for the ruins of the Priory. At the point where the old Tontine Inn divided the broad coaching road from its thinner brother, he had no hesitation in following the latter. A little further on Owlcliffe came into view. He pedalled harder at sight of it. Those walls held, for all that he knew, his whole world. At any rate he had come over two hundred miles on the chance of seeing, if not speaking to, her.

Smoke was coming out of some of the chimneys. The evening was cold enough for a fire. Some of her belongings were certainly at home.

Mrs. Meek, as circumstances had misnamed the landlady of the Harebell, was somewhat taken aback when the distinguished cyclist asked for a bed.

The inn was clean, but of the humblest description. She was not accustomed to accomodate "the quality," but the thought of the jealousy of the Alison Arms stimulated her to acquiescence and falsehood. If he could put up with a bare stone floor in the parlour, her Brussels square being at the cleaner's, she could manage. It was great luck that she had a spare room. In the summer so many gentry came. They preferred the Harebell to the Arms. She had once had a lord's brother for the shooting. One lie makes another. By the time that she showed Howard his bedroom her mendacity had made John Meek, a drunken lout who was constantly threatened with the bailiffs, into an enviable man of fortune. His lady was afraid that the rafters would all but touch Howard's head, but her husband assured her that old-fashioned rooms were thought a deal of, so had not had the house rebuilt as she suggested. She was all but checkmated when Howard asked for a chop. The nearest butcher lived three miles away. Worse still, he no longer allowed her credit, and they had not a shilling in the bar. Invention jogged her memory with the reminder that she and John were vegetarians. The lord's brother never touched meat and had first set the fashion. They lived on ham and eggs. Ham, evidently, being reckoned a vegetable in the north, Howard declared himself willing to follow in the footsteps of his aristocratic predecessor.

At eight o'clock he walked along to the Priory and then, at risk of prosecution, through the woods till

he came to the Owlcliffe garden-wall. From there he had a good view of the house. The dining-room was not lighted up, but the French window stood open and once or twice the sound of women's laughter reached him. Outside the French window was a stone balcony with steps leading down to the lawn.

As a clock struck nine a man and two women came out on to the balcony. The man was smoking; the taller of the women stood with her hands clasped on his shoulder, the other sat apart on the parapet looking towards the moat. Soon the couple went indoors, and he and Grey were left alone with only a sweet barrier of flowers and fruit and a transparent belt of trees between them. Grey sat very still, with her hands crossed on her knee—the attitude of a martyr awaiting the end. Once she bent forward and gathered one of the roses that scaled the stone-work, then relapsed into her former state of abstraction. Coffee was brought there, but she sent it away untasted. Howard saw that she was unhappy, and when at the end of an hour she strolled aimlessly on to the lawn it was all that he could do to refrain from joining her. Before the old sun-dial she stopped and laid her head with an air of dejection against its cold face. He rushed forward, but at that moment a voice from the house called "Grey," and the poor little bond-woman hurried away.

Howard walked round to the front of the house and stood with his eyes fixed in the direction of the Rose Room. The lamps were lighted and the red blinds drawn, but in a few minutes he heard a familiar little voice singing snatches from the last Gaiety opera. Nothing more serious than a coon song was allowed, for once or twice she struck a few Grieg chords which were greeted derisively. Soon after that all was darkness.

He was within five minutes' walk of the Harebell.

Mrs. Meek would be sitting up for him, yet he must needs rush round to the other side of the house again. He knew which was Grey's room, and something told him that she was in a wakeful mood. This time he vaulted the wall and followed the path skirting the moat which led to the rookery. Opposite the dining-room he stopped. A couple of storeys higher up two unshuttered windows stood open.

He could distinctly see Burton brushing Grey's hair by candlelight. Later, when the maid had gone, the little white figure came to the window and knelt down in prayer. At the sight of her to all appearance unchanged all hateful suspicions had vanished. It was not possible that her wretchedness could be the outcome of her own actions. He was sadly puzzled as he kept vigil with her, but he was prepared to stake his life that patient submission such as hers denotes that another hand has clapped on the yoke and that it galls less if not tampered with.

Not until she blew out her candle did he return to the village. It was midnight. He wondered if he would find the door of the inn locked against him, and tried to solace himself with the thought that perhaps the lord's brother had not always gone to bed betimes. He breakfasted late the next morning from design, thinking it expedient not to move abroad much before dusk. It was difficult to divine which would be better for Grey: to apprise her of his arrival or go back to Town that afternoon without saying anything. The fact that the gossip about her had been false had been sufficiently proved, so self-sacrifice had not prompted the answer to his letter. The question now was whether she would welcome him as a friend. Mrs. Meek was incapable of keeping his advent a secret, and bribery was not advisable. Grey was not happy. So much was certain. It was hardly likely that she too was worried by a hopeless love affair.

Howard was one of those men who hold that any woman can have any man once she sets her mind on his capture. Still, whatever her trouble, he might be able to help her. He hardly knew what to do. The answer to the tormenting question was eventually answered for him.

He was sitting in the parlour opposite the bar when he heard Grey's voice in the passage. The door stood ajar. A dog, which he guessed to be Bogie, came in and sniffed at him. Was she coming in, too? He stood still listening for a moment, and was almost glad when she went into the bar. Bogie pattered after her. Howard pushed open the door and, peeping through the hinges, saw her standing but a few yards from him.

But how changed. He would hardly have known her for the same girl who barely a year ago had bidden him a flippant good-bye on the door-step. She looked more like a sister of his Grey, and a much older one. The plump cheeks had fallen away to nothing; her mouth was tightly compressed like that of a stoic who suffers torturing pain and determines not to cry out under it. And the eyes of this carefully-nurtured child who had never been denied anything in reason were hungry eyes, those of one who is starving for love, for the staff of life. Still worse, the forehead above the right one was bruised and discoloured, and the sight of it hurt him more than all, for in spite of himself he fell to wondering how she had come by it.

Mrs. Meek clattered along the red tiled passage in pattens on her way from the wash-house.

"Good mornin', Miss Grey. Arm sorry to 'ave kept you waaitin', but we're that thrang this mornin'! We've gotten a gentleman stoppin' 'ere, a reel gentleman. 'E sleeps in a flannen cricketin' suit and 'is 'air-broosh 'andles are white bone, the very marrer of the carvers oop

at the 'All. And our John William sez 'is bicycle's a beauty. 'E was a-exercisin' of it a bit afore breakfast for 'im. They run iver so mooch better for bein' used, like galloways, you know."

Grey could not help smiling, but she did not evince much interest in the "real gentleman." She could picture the moist member of the C.T.C. so well.

"I've come to pay for the cooking brandy, Mrs. Meek. It was five bottles, I think."

Howard fancied that her voice faltered as she took a sovereign out of her purse. She certainly blushed as Mrs. Meek referred to the books.

"And you won't forget to cross them off. I don't fancy that Mrs. Beaumont had a bill."

"Not me. Why, miss! you've 'appened a haccident to your eye."

"Yes, I look as if I had been fighting, don't I? I fell against the table and had to have the doctor to put a stitch in. How are the ducks?"

"Gettin' on cliver."

"You'll let me have the first refusal of them?"

"Yes, in coorse, miss. And you'll not forget t'brood that t'fox took."

"No, I'll tell the Master. Good-morning."

Howard at the window saw that she turned to the right and apparently went straight home again.

"That's Miss Halison from t'big 'ouse yonder. She coom to settle oop for some cookin' brandy, as she calls it. Five bottles in a fortnight, and not even time for maaking t'mince-meat. You'll p'raps 'ave heard tell of Mrs. Beaumont? She's a bonny face."

"Yes, I have heard of her," he answered shortly. He could not bring himself to listen to the woman's gossip.

"And Miss Grey, as nice a yongng laady as ever was. It's sad for the likes of 'er to lead sooch a life."

Mrs. Meek was too busy to notice his irresponsible manner.

She hurried away in the best of tempers, bent on doing her utmost for his comfort.

That day the tariff was reversed from ham and eggs to eggs and ham.

CHAPTER XIX.

This year knows nothing of last year ;
To-morrow has no more to say to yesterday.

—SWINBURNE.

FLINGING caution to the winds Howard rushed out of doors and to the woods with all speed. It was true, then.

The evidence of the maid he had counted *nil*. He knew Mrs. Copley to be a woman who would stop at nothing to gain her own ends, but he was an absolute stranger to Mrs. Meek. She knew nothing of him and his relations with the Alison family, and would gain nothing by mendacity. Yet he could not reconcile Grey's looks with the knowledge. She had changed wofully, but not for the worse. Her face had gained strength as well as sadness. The thoughtful earnestness in the eyes was the kind begotten of lofty purpose and high thinking. Women were long in showing signs of debauch he had been told, but he was sure that their tendency was to put on flesh, not to lose it. Grey must have become a stone thinner since the preceding summer. He spent hours in the woods arguing the case from all standpoints, but they were all as so many spokes with a common axle. He had lost count of time and place, but the sight of a keeper with his gun reminded him that he was trespassing. He jumped up in the bracken and determined to escape before the eye of the enemy was upon him. There was a sameness about the woods misleading to a stranger. He hoped to strike a path

close to the Priory, but when he reached the open he saw the Owlcliffe stables close in front of him. His nearest road home was clearly past the house. If he could successfully run the gauntlet of the door and windows he would be safe. Any one had a right to saunter in the churchyard. There was no one to be seen. He almost ran down the lane, only slackening speed when the Harebell came in sight. On his right he noticed two or three fields laid away to pasture, and in the one nearest to him were four or five hunters holiday-making. The sight of a good horse always tempted him to play truant. An irresistible longing came upon him to see them gallop. He ran up the bank and rattled his hat on his stick. No stampede followed. He saw then for the first time counter attractions on the other side of the hedge. A basket of apples and two people. Beaumont and his wife, undoubtedly. Escape was impossible. There was not a tree within fifty yards. Besides, they had seen him, and were staring at him. To ram his hat over his eyes and mumble an apology seemed the most politic thing to do. He walked towards them on the opposite side of the road. A sailor's gait often betrays him.

"Charlie! old boy, I'd know that roll anywhere. I am very glad to see you, but what has brought you here?"

"I wanted a day or two in the country so put myself and my bicycle into the train yesterday."

"I don't think you know my wife? Firenze, you have heard me speak of Mr. Howard?"

"Oh, yes; and I think you know my sister, too?"

"Yes. How is she?"

"Very well; but you must come and see her for yourself. Where are you staying?"

"At the Harebell."

"That terrible hole! You must come to us for the remainder of your visit."

"Yes, of course you must, Charlie. Go and pack your things and come up at once."

To refuse was out of the question. He found himself accepting the invitation with alacrity. He would like to have known Grey's feelings in the matter, but if she showed any signs of uneasiness or displeasure at meeting him he would arrange for an immediate recall to Town. The three parted with mutual pleasure at the thought of a speedy reunion.

Mrs. Beaumont struck Howard as being one of the sweetest women he had ever met. Grey had by no means exaggerated her description of either looks or manner. Beaumont, for his part, was delighted at the turn of affairs. It would mean much to him to have a man to talk to, and one of his old friends moreover with whose tastes he had always agreed. Since his sister left they had had no visitor. His wife had not the energy for entertaining even in the smallest way. When she was well she liked her fellow-creatures as much as anybody, provided that they did not bore her. This was one of her good weeks. She liked the look of Mr. Howard extremely. If she were not mistaken he was one of those delightful people who are keen on any enjoyment, and he would amuse Grey. Some atonement to her was necessary. There had been a terrible scene when her husband had discovered her cruelty to her. He had never lost his temper with her before, and the few bitter home-truths he had told her still rankled in her memory. Beaumont had advised Grey to go away for a time. He did not relish the idea of being left alone with Firenze, but it was clearly his duty to offer to take Grey's place for a few weeks. She had not been away for a night since she came to them. It was pos-

sible that in her absence Firenze's unreasonable jealousy of her would disappear and that she would look forward to her return. The temptation to go was very great, but Grey had obdurately refused. Firenze's torrent of abuse had not been intentional any more than her violence. She was not answerable for anything that she did under the influence of drink; indeed, the kindest way to regard her at such times was as a half-witted child. When she came to her senses she would be as sorry as any one for what had happened, and she would miss her terribly if she recovered to find her flown. No substitute would be of any use however much Firenze might appear to wish for a different face about her. Results proved that even after a year's constant devotion her patient was worse. She knew her sister better than any one living, and yet, even she was being continually outwitted by her ingenious inventions to gain her own ends. She had taken barely sufficient recreation during the last few months to keep her in health. For the future, if she wished to do any permanent good, she clearly saw that even that meagre allowance must be forsworn. Beaumont's relief at her answer had been great. He knew how necessary his little sister-in-law had become to his wife, and reproved himself bitterly, now that he realised her thankless task, that he had more than once charged her with impatience and irritability towards Firenze. She deserved a little sunshine. He determined to make Howard's visit as enjoyable as possible to her.

Grey was washing Bogie in the bath-room when Burton came in. She was rubbing her hands feverishly together. Grey kneeling on the floor elbow-deep in soap-suds did not see her.

"Please, miss, may I take the key of the linen-closet?"

"Yes; you know where to find it."

"I want some sheets for the Cherry Room; there's a gentleman coming to stay."

Such an event had not been known since Firenze's marriage, but it did not interest Grey.

"Wouldn't the Ash Room do? It takes less getting ready."

"Miss Grey, it's Mr. Howard."

"Mr. Howard? Who's Mr. Howard?"

"Oh! Miss Grey, your Mr. Howard, our Mr. Howard!"

And then Grey realised that the person to whose name Burton had given a commercial prefix was no business acquaintance, no hound judge, but the one thing on earth that she loved.

She put her hands to her face. Bogie jumped up and licked off the soap, then spluttering and sneezing escaped from his impromptu bathing tent and ran downstairs.

"He is staying at the Harebell, and it appears that the master and mistress met him and asked him here. He is expected any minute. It's only half-past five. Your white muslin's quite clean. Shall I bring you some hot water?"

"I'm not going down. At least, not yet."

"No; just you rest quietly. You've two hours before dinner. I'll just fetch the key."

Her words roused Grey to the necessity of his comfort.

"No; I'll give you the linen. You must have the best hem-stitched sheets, and those roses in my room are quite fresh. He must have them for his writing-table."

She put the vases on a table outside her door, and then locked herself in her room. She sat down before

the dressing-table to think. Why had he come? Accident could not have brought him to so remote a spot. The attractions of the Priory and the surrounding country were transcendently beautiful to her, but were a mere drop in the ocean of sight-seeing proper. In any case it would have been in better taste to have stopped away. She was uncertain whether to be angry or pleased at the step. The implied doubt scored many points in his favour. When a woman is annoyed she knows it. Again, he who seeks her out with his pride, hope and discretion at a low ebb, is the man who romps in with flying colours at election-time.

She heard voices; that is, one voice on the lawn, and looking out saw Howard and her brother-in-law. She could smell the smoke of their cigarettes, could almost hear what they said. Six o'clock struck. There was plenty of time to show him the stables, the long walk, part of the woods before dinner. Each minute away from him seemed wasted. Should she rush down to play the part of cicerone and chance the consequences? Her Bible lay on the window-seat, which she always used as a *prie-Dieu*. The edge of a certain white paper caught her eye: "*And not to show him by word or look or deed what he is to me.*" Would he have known? She looked in the glass. The flame of such love-light a blind man could have felt, almost seen. Not until it was reduced to white ash must she venture to speak to him.

Firenze joined the couple outside; challenged Howard to a game of croquet, talking and laughing with becoming animation. When the dressing-bell rang she flung down her mallet and left the men to their own devices. Edward pointed in the direction of the stables. Howard took out his watch and shook his head. She caught the word "post." Her heart beat quickly. He

had wished her to be the first to show him the stables. The letter-bag had gone a couple of hours since, but he went indoors. Much good was undone by the little incident, and her temperature was still far from normal when Firenze came in. The pilgrimage to Grey's room was a thing to be done once in a lifetime, like the ascent of the Pyramid. She had not been there for years. She sank on to the sofa.

"Oh! why do you live on the top of a precipice? The servants would tell you what has happened. It was rather luck our meeting him. He will liven you up."

"I hope that you didn't ask him on my account. I don't care two straws about people."

"But you've nothing against Mr. Howard? I must say I like the look of him extremely."

"Oh, no! he's quite nice."

"Did you know him well in Town?"

"We saw a good deal of him. He was very kind in sending us theatre tickets. He was always a useful man to fall back upon."

"But you're not particularly keen on annexing him? I mean, will I be poaching if we agree to halve him? You shall look after him in the mornings and I in the afternoons."

"Oh! as for that, you are welcome to him altogether," said Grey, knowing all the time that the gift she offered was entailed on her beyond dispute.

"My dear, I wouldn't think of such a thing. I only wanted to know how the land lay that there might be no misunderstanding. I suppose an old married woman like me ought not to care about making a new man-friend, but it's a bad thing to get into a groove, I'm certain, and Ted loves him dearly. Now I must go and dress. Should you advise my white crêpe or pink brocade?"

"Men like white, I think, as a rule."

She knew that sackcloth would have passed almost unnoticed. For herself she chose to put on the gown which Burton had laid out for her, not from any desire to attract—it was one of her best—but from sheer inability to attend to outside things. The selection of a dress seemed such a trivial matter knowing as she did that it was only into her eyes that he would look.

The house had ceased to be a very punctual one under the new *régime*. She loitered in her room long after she was ready, frightened to run the risk of meeting Howard alone. When she heard the *frou-frou* of Firenze's train on the stairs she plucked up courage to make a start for the drawing-room, knowing that the double-doors leading from her part of the house would afford a welcome asylum in case of need. Exactly opposite was the Cherry Room. The door stood ajar. With the sensation of a *Lodore* of hot and cold water rushing down her spine and a quivering lump which kept forcing itself up in her throat like the persistent head of a "Jack-in-the-box" she ran across to the stair-head. So far she was safe. Then with the anxiety of an amateur actress to be ultra letter-perfect she began saying her part over and over to herself till she reached the drawing-room door. Her reading of the world-worn *rôle* was polite indifference coupled with the kindly welcome of a hospitable hostess. She must bear in mind that he was *her* friend. Thus tepid interest in him was compulsory. She pushed open the door. Firenze sat in the window-seat with Howard. Grey had entered noiselessly, but he turned his head and rose instantly. She could never be sufficiently thankful for the rays of the evening sun, which, falling full on her face compelled her to lower her eyes. He, standing back to the light,

looked a mere silhouette, but she was at the full mercy of his searching gaze.

She held out her hand.

"I am so sorry not to have been down before, Mr. Howard. This 'gleesome, fleasome' thing must be my excuse," pointing to Bogie. "I was washing him when I heard that you were expected."

"I have been in good hands, Miss Alison."

He did not remark upon her black eye, yet the most unobservant man must have noticed it. Its true history, he was sure, was not a pretty one.

A pause.

One of them must break it.

"You are on leave, I suppose?"

"I helped myself to a holiday. They don't give us too many."

She could have hugged Enderby for announcing dinner at that moment. It seemed interminable to Grey, yet its success was undoubted. She had arranged that upstanding branches of rose-foliage should hide her from Howard. There was only her voice to school. She managed to effect a compromise between patent pleasure at his coming and a more eloquent silence. Firenze in her brightest mood carried all before her. Howard threw off the cloud of dejection which threatened to envelop him, and forced himself to return her lead while listening to every word which Grey addressed to Beaumont. The dinner itself was one of Mrs. Hunter's masterpieces. The champagne above reproach. Howard noticed that the sisters took lemonade, but the fact carried little weight with him. He thought that Mrs. Beaumont looked as if she needed a glass of wine, but she doubtless wished to set poor little Grey a good example. He caught sight of the bruised brow between the rose-leaves. It was like a fire-brand from

hell, yet he felt nothing of disgust for her, only unspeakable pity.

"Do you dance?" asked Firenze.

"I used to be able to. I can still sit out."

"Because we might get up an impromptu hop here one night. This floor is perfect. We can produce local fiddling talent. A few young men and maidens would be easily collected. Or, happy thought, shall we give a real dance? Ted, doesn't it strike you that the house wants warming?"

"Well, not exactly, little woman. I've been vainly trying to keep my language iced all day. Kennels and obstreperous puppies do not engender Arctic properties, but do as you like."

He did not care particularly for dancing, but for his wife to evince keenness in anything gave him unspeakable pleasure.

"I think that I shall order a house-party from Town."

"Wire to Coleman, Mrs. Beaumont. Depend upon it he will know where your friends are to be found better than you will."

"I think that I must have Eugenia Hickson, Grey, but she must not stay more than three nights. Her American accent is like the cuckoo, very refreshing for a short time. And besides, she always has such lovely evening gowns. I have three beauties. Yes, she positively must only stay three nights. In a case of necessity I hope that I could take a beating like an Englishman, but there is no reason why I should court defeat on my own territory, is there? And then there's Mimi Hope. She's a dear, and she'll act as a sort of refrigerator to some of the others I have in mind. If they all come they will have to be clapped on the ice with your missing words, Ted. And I must have a palmist. There is Agnes Harding. She's lovely, but penniless. One can't put a

railing round her and placard her 'Dangerous,' but she's a marvellous clairvoyante. No unpublished thought, however illegible, baffles her."

"Oh! suppose that you don't ask her, then, Mrs. Beaumont. I hate these people who possess master-keys to one's Blue Beard chambers. From your account of the other women I don't for a moment doubt that every man in the house, myself included, will declare himself a professional palmist."

"By the way, I suppose you are going to have some men, Firenze. You haven't mentioned any so far, you know."

"My dear old boy, there'll be no difficulty about finding men. Will there, Grey?"

"Oh, no," said Grey, knowing that they bore the same proportion in the neighbourhood as a regiment of soldiers in a provincial theatre, and would have to be eked out accordingly.

"What shall you wear, Mouse?"

"Black, I suppose, to match my eye. An artistic woman always chooses her gowns the same colour. My dear girl, you might as well ask me what I should fancy for my breakfast six months hence. Just imagine expecting a woman to make up her mind all this time beforehand."

"But it's only a few days ahead. Mr. Howard can, unfortunately, only spare us a very short time."

"Well, then, I appeal to Mr. Howard. Can any woman be expected to know her own mind even a few days in advance?"

"Of course not. Why, it's like a subscription to a circulating library; its main advantage is that the books may be changed a dozen times a day if necessary."

"There, you see, I have found an ally. What music are you going to have? Old Pybus would get above

himself in such a goodly company. Even at the servants' ball after supper he mixed his vocations of butcher and musician sadly; he mistook his fiddle for a neck of mutton and tried to cut off the scrag end with his bow."

"Oh! we'll have Gottlieb or the Blue Hungarians. Come, shall we join the ladies?"

"He's charming, Grey! charming! and what a beautiful face. Those clear-cut faces always make me feel that I want to teach in the Sunday-School and leave off crimping my hair. He is not of the world though he lives in the heart of so-called life. Yet there's nothing mawkish about him. He's quite a man's man, but he's clean-lived, I dare swear. He would never under any stress dishonour the humblest woman any more than he would stoop to utter a *double entendre* in a mixed company."

"I'm glad that you like him. It does you good to see people, and Edward is so pleased to see you interested."

"Yes, I'm quite *fy* to-night. Play a valse. The last time I danced was with Maxime. He had feet like unboiled lobsters. I used to have a sort of horrible fascination in treading on them."

She pushed aside some of the furniture, and throwing her train over her arm pirouetted round the room inventing new steps as she went on. The men strolling outside stopped to look in at the window.

"La Loie ought to take a tip from you, Mrs. Beaumont, and dress all in white. You can't think how nice it looks. I suppose that if I were even a plagiarist poet I should liken the white satin feet to two mice, only I can't bear them."

"Not all mice, I hope. You like my little tame mouse, don't you?" putting a hand on Grey's shoulder.

"Oh! I am only a clock-work mouse, a grey, wooden thing without a will of its own."

"Come out and I will wind you up. Miss Alison, you are wanted to talk."

"Come, Firenze, let us go out."

When they reached the lawn Beaumont signed to his wife to hang behind with him and let the others go on in front. He wished Grey to have a good time, but she linked her arm through her sister's. They walked four abreast. Howard looked disappointed. When Firenze suggested going indoors no one dissented. She took up her Patience cards, hoping that Howard would follow her to the card-table. Instead, he stayed by Grey.

"Won't you show me the Rose Room? This conveys nothing to me."

"Oh, yes. Firenze, I am going to show Mr. Howard the Rose Room. Shall we sit up there?"

"Oh! no; I've just arranged all my packs."

Grey led the way upstairs.

"I'm afraid it's not very tidy, but flowers only last a day this weather."

She took up a bowl and swept a heap of rose-leaves into it.

"That is rather a comfortable window-seat." She might have been speaking of it for the first time. In the past she had told him so much of her favourite corner that in thinking of her he pictured her there more often than in the saddle.

"How beautiful these are." He pointed to a gigantic glass vase standing on the floor filled with trails of guelder and pink and white roses. "I love these things. *Boules de neige*, aren't they?"

"Yes, or guelder roses. I put them in to chaperon the buds. Guelder means elder, you know."

"You are a great advocate for propriety; I never knew it till this evening."

Silence would have been fatal. She laughed nervously.

"You haven't told me how you like the room?"

"I have never seen one to touch it, and I have been all over the world."

"This is an impossible light for the pictures. You must see the 'Decoy' by daylight. Shall we go downstairs? It's ten o'clock. The clock-work mouse is about run down. I think it is going round on ——"

She staggered against the wall. The tension of the last few hours had been terrible. In a few seconds everything was a blank. She was vaguely conscious that he caught her and supported her to the window-seat, but how long she had been there when she came to herself she had no idea.

Howard was fanning her, grave concern on his face. He hardly knew what to think of the incident. She had talked infinitely more since dinner. She had become quite excitable and had reeled like a drunken man. Was it possible that when she left the dining-room she had run upstairs and taken something? She had certainly sat down to the piano five minutes after. Had there been time? Poison once injected into the mind works like quicksilver. He was reminded how deeply-laid are the machinations of a woman crazed with thirst. In order to avoid Firenze's suspicions she might have a flask secreted in some *bonbonnière* in the drawing-room. To gain her confidence would be something. It was not long before she opened her eyes. Still on the borderland between sleeping and waking she looked up and smiled at him, but he did not smile back. She was nearer to him then than they had been since they met again, but he had never been one to stand at a boundary fence and pot birds not lawfully his. It was constantly done, but according to his code it was not right. It was not

"cricket." And Grey was a girl who seldom, if ever, lost her head.

She soon remembered what had happened.

"How stupid of me. I must have turned faint, an unheard-of thing. I am so sorry."

She tried to rise. He pulled her back.

"Wait a minute. I don't think that you are well. You are so much thinner since—since last year. Tell me what is the matter, I might be able to help you."

"There is nothing the matter with me, really and truly. I am not too thin, just a nice riding weight."

"And your eye! How did you hurt it? It must be painful."

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"Drunk and disorderly."

He did not know what to make of her answer. Whether she purposely sailed near the wind and trusted to her devil-may-care mood to pull her through he could not for the life of him say. The one thing that she made clear beyond dispute was her unwillingness to confide in him.

They returned in silence to the drawing-room, both having lost all count of time. Firenze was still playing Patience. Beaumont dozed in an arm-chair.

"Which one are you doing, Mrs. Beaumont?"

"I am trying to do one which we have named 'Job.' With luck it may be done about twice in a life-time."

"And still you struggle on hoping for the best. Some people's lives remind me of a difficult Patience. Nothing but failure after failure, but they persist in trying to succeed on the off-chance, poor devils!"

"But you should think of their joy if it comes out," said Grey. "Nothing can touch them then."

"So you would think, but read of Madame Descoigns in Balzac's *Two Brothers*. She put into a lottery every

day of her life for years and years trusting for the magic 'trey' to turn up. The only time that it did turn up a brutal man had robbed her of her stake."

"Oh! I don't like stories like that," pouted Firenze, "they ought all to have a good old-fashioned ending. That poor old lady had probably been brought up on the 'Try, try again' principle. It was mean of Fate to add such a complicating codicil. Wake up, Ted, I want some cake and soda-water. Come, Grey, let's sup before we go."

CHAPTER XX.

Perhaps we had lived too closely to diverge
So absolutely : leave two clocks they say
Wound up to different hours upon one shelf
And slowly through the interior wheels of each
The blind mechanic motion sets itself
A throb to feel out for the mutual time.

—AURORA LEIGH.

ON the following morning Grey purposely came down late for breakfast, forgetting that it was Beaumont's "Bench day."

"I'm afraid that I must run away now," he was saying as she entered languidly, "unless you'd like to ride over to North Appleton with me."

"No, thanks. I've seen wife-beaters before in my travels. They are cosmopolitan, I fancy."

"Then I'll leave you in my sister-in-law's care. Perhaps she will show you how hounds ought to be exercised. You'll find my kennel-coat and a hunting-crop hanging up in the hall."

"I think that we might ride instead of going on our flat feet," said Grey, when they were left together, "and then you can see the moor."

She was convinced in her own mind that this would prove a less sociable plan than trudging shoulder to shoulder with him along the high road. The horses should be chosen accordingly. The young bay for herself, who could be depended upon to break into a gallop at the slightest touch, and a tortoise for him which should

find no sleeping hare to compete with. She caught sight of the newspaper on the sideboard. Here was a splendid, unromantic opportunity for tiding over the unlooked for *lille-à-lille*.

"Won't you read the *Yorkshire Post* while I finish my breakfast, Mr. Howard?"

He obeyed, first silently, then gradually fell into the old habit of reading aloud to her. She found herself unconsciously listening to the voice, not the words, in an attitude of rapt attention. He passed his cup for some more coffee, and, leaning his arms on the table, began discussing a great Unionist speech with her. In spite of precautions the meal was becoming conjugal.

"I'm afraid that I don't quite grasp what it means. We must talk about it later. If we are to ride at eleven I must leave you and interview the housekeeper."

Shortly after a thought occurred to her. She went back to the dining-room.

"I'm sure that Edward will lend you some riding things. Shall I send Thomas to you?"

"I have some, thanks. I always make it a rule to travel with an old rat-catching kit. Even if I were going to spend a week-end with an old maiden aunt in a cathedral city I would take it with me; but, of course, as you know, I don't possess any kith and kin."

Grey hurried away to order the horses. That smile supplicating for sympathy had all but unhinged her. She could find no fault with Howard's behaviour. He was proving himself quite amenable to reason, more so than on the preceding evening; but the great gulf which she had fixed between them seemed to be lessening by some unaccountable means. She had half a mind to strap on a spur in case of emergency, then put the thought hastily aside. They were barbarous things. She would not have poor Ronald suffer so much as a scratch to

further her own selfish ends. With twenty-five couple of hounds and all the hunt terriers she trusted that there would be plenty of excusable diversions at hand should any leading questions by chance be put to her.

Shortly after eleven they were riding side by side through the woods towards the Priory, just as she had so often pictured that they would. Howard looked his best on a horse. A rat-catcher with the charm of the Pied Piper. Grey talked incessantly. She told him the names of all the hounds—a process which she felt must have been about as interesting to him as an introduction to a strange photograph album, but he was quite content. To be with her again was a great thing, and he was, besides, a real lover of horse and hound. They left the Priory to the right, and went up a ride towards the top of the wood.

"That's the 'wishing-well,'" said Grey.

"Oh, I must wish, then."

"It's no good without a bent pin."

"Might as well tell me not to think of a piebald pony's tail, unless you have a pin on you?"

"Not I. A sure sign of old-maidism. Can you sacrifice the one in the back of your tie?"

"Yes, I will. I like all these old customs. Tell me what to wish."

"That is against the rules, but I think that I can tell you what you will wish all the same."

"What?"

He looked up at her from the ground.

"That you hadn't taken the pin out of your stock, for not all the 'king's horses and all the king's men' could ever put that distorted thing back again—Trixie, Sinbad, ware, riot!"

The terriers had put up a rabbit in the bracken, and, followed by the whole pack, were running back towards

the Priory. Grey flung the bridle of Howard's horse to him and galloped away. He was soon at her side. It was a race between them to reach the hounds. Grey blew a long blast on her horn, keeping her eye meanwhile on the rabbit which scuttled through a hairy fence just ahead. Two of the terriers pressed close behind, and the clumsy hounds were casting about for a thin place in the hedge when the thong of Howard's crop brought some of them to their senses. Grey assumed her "coster" voice and growled herself hoarse. Howard whistled the terriers.

"I wish that you were not such a strict disciplinarian. We should have had a nice little gallop in the low country."

"It *was* tempting, but let us console ourselves with the thought that the pace would have been very slow."

She trotted up the ride again with the hounds at heel, then as the ground became steep pulled Ronald into a walk. There was just room for her and Howard to ride abreast. He put his hand on her horse's neck and pushed him away now and then that Grey's foot might not be crushed by the close contact of the two stable-companions. They were old friends, "Sir Roger" and the bay, and on affectionate terms. So were the riders, Howard knew, yet undiscovered worlds of mystery now lay between them. For a long time neither of them spoke. The rhythm of a horse's movement had always soothed Grey like a rocking-chair. She had forgotten where she was for the time being, but in her soul was a sense of peace for months past an alien. The bay stumbling over a twig awoke her to the exigencies of reality. She found Howard looking intently at her.

"How is Kalifa?" she asked hurriedly.

"Very fit. I have turned him into a polo pony. He plays beautifully."

"Oh! it is dangerous," she cried from her heart, still half-dreaming. "There was a terrible accident in India last month."

"Yes, I know; but for me it does not matter. You see, I am unfettered."

There was nothing of exultation in his voice. His eyes sought hers. She knew that she had only to ask him to give up polo and that he would do it. He was mad on the game. He played for Hurlingham, and was a magnificent horseman—their best "back"; but finished riders were as liable to be killed as inferior. She had no right to ask him to sacrifice his one recreation. If she did it could only mean one thing; she could see that he hung upon her answer.

"No, of course. But Kalifa is such a darling—and the poor ponies' fetlocks get so terribly banged sometimes."

He turned away his head, and Grey began to crack her crop absently. Suddenly he asked—

"Where are the hounds?"

She looked round and saw to her dismay that there was not so much as a fat puppy to be seen anywhere, but simultaneously there was a great throwing of tongues above them.

"They are running something," said the poor little huntswoman, "and the only gate is a quarter of a mile away."

Ronald had heard the welcome sound, and without waiting for the word of command rushed wildly up the ride.

"Keep behind me," shouted Grey. "It's a rough place."

She piloted him by a short cut to the gate, sometimes leaving the path altogether and now and then ducking her head parallel with her horse's neck to avoid the

branches of the trees. Along the top of the wood were undulating hay fields. A few pikes were dotted about in the green grass at intervals. Grey was standing inside the gate when Howard joined her. He could neither see nor hear any vestige of the truant pack, but her practised eye detected something white moving over the brow of a rocky hillock.

"There they are right up past the Lady Chapel. We must ride for our lives to catch them now." She gave the bay his head, and straight as an arrow shot from a bow he almost flew up the rising ground. Sir Roger tried his best, but could not gain a yard on him. At such times youth tells. Ronald seemed hardly to slacken speed when he came to the quarry in which the ruined chapel stood. Grey clutched his mane, leant forward on his neck, and he bounded to the top like a goat. Sir Roger, in soft condition at best, was visibly distressed. Even for the sake of keeping Grey in sight Howard had not the heart to press him. He dismounted at the worst part and led him up. Flat arable fields were now to be seen divided by neat, upstanding hedges. Sir Roger took heart at the sight, and cleared them like a bird. He took the bit between his teeth down into the next hollow, and Howard knew that he could not have stopped him if he had tried. At the bottom they came upon Grey surrounded by the hounds. She had been vexed at the start, Howard knew. For one so business-like to be caught napping was humiliating. And the knowledge of the cause had rankled most. Now, her eyes danced with excitement.

"It's an old fox. That man on the wall viewed him. They spoke to him up to here. Just cast forward along that hedge while I tighten my girths."

"They won't follow me, I'm afraid."

"Oh! I was forgetting that you are not always here."

"That grey one has it," pointing to the feathering stern of an old hound.

"Yes, Harbinger has it. Yooi! Harbinger, good lad!"

There was a whimper. Then Harbinger threw up his head and ran mute up the field. A chorus followed the recitative. The air was filled with music. Grey was quite intoxicated by it.

She turned round in her saddle.

"Fancy! fox-hunting in July, and a scent, too; thanks to last night's rain. Did you ever know a run quite like it?"

"Never."

They jumped the next fence neck and neck, landing almost on a hay-cock. Hounds were again at fault, but before they could reach them they had the line again through some standing corn.

"Oh! this is disgraceful. It is Edward's land, but ought we to go on?"

"We can ride wide of the corn. Don't go home. It is the only hunt we have ever had together."

That decided her. Anything in the shape of a favour she would not grant him.

"I shall whip them off. No true sportsman would go on."

"Come along, then, you will have your work cut out."

He now took the lead. There was the chance that a cutting-machine might be lying *perdu* at the edge of the corn, or a scythe in a sheath of grass. The deputy-master was beginning to tire, he could see.

"Give me the horn," he said, as a feeble sound like that of a toy trumpet reached him.

He put all his lung-power into his own effort, but still hounds streamed on unheeding.

They had now left cultivation behind, and were on the wild moorland. The select field followed. The springy turf seemed to put new life into the horses. Lathered with foam, young and old alike bounded over boulders and clumps of rushes like four-year-olds, nor stumbled once in the breast-high heather. Side by side they jumped whatever came in their way, sometimes but a six-inch grip, but as often a winding stream with wide shelving banks. Neither of the riders spoke. Howard knew that he could trust Grey's knowledge of the country not to lead them into bog or pitfall. He liked the silence best. She seemed nearer to him then. From time to time he looked at her; when a pack of grouse got up under their horses' feet, for instance, and when they passed a dead sheep caught in a furze bush, but she did not look at him. He had hoped, at least, to catch an answering smile before it vanished into space like a bubble, but she kept her eyes fixed steadily between her horse's ears after the manner of a nervous horse-woman. Still, it was a great ride. Fraught with small danger to life or limb, yet the greatest he remembered in fact or fiction. Untrammelled by time, conscience, convention. Flying over that grand tableland in the clouds, nearer heaven than he had been for months, for the barrier which Grey had thought fit to erect between them was of small account. A *papier-mâché* partition, too thin to conceal a whisper. They had a race of two miles or so before they caught hounds. Helpless and scattered they found them near a peat-stack, and at the sound of Grey's voice they ran to her like so many lost children. They could make nothing more of the fox by themselves, and Grey, longing for the moment when she could see them all safe in kennel, determined to take them home at once. She ran her eye quickly over them,

"They're all on. Shall we start?"

"No; give old Roger five minutes' grace."

He had worded his request very diplomatically, and Roger had undoubtedly had about enough galloping for one day. Grey jumped off, and sat down beside Howard on a grassy bank. In her pocket she found a bar of chocolate. They devoured it ravenously, then discovered too late that it had made them very thirsty. Howard thought that there was a flask on his saddle. There was. An empty one.

"But if you don't object to water there's a delicious looking spring close by."

"Why, you know that I never drink anything else, and the iron water up here is the most refreshing I know anywhere."

He carefully washed out the bottle till it had lost all taint of whisky, and filled it from the running stream. They drank in turns till their thirst was quenched. When Howard lighted a cigarette and flung himself down on the heather with his hands clasped behind his head Grey had not the heart to disturb him. He had been so good to her, so considerate throughout the run. Without assuming any knowledge of the "noble science" he had proved invaluable to her. He deserved a rest every bit as much as the horses, but she was longing to be once more in the saddle busied to all intents and purposes with the hounds. She was no longer sure of herself. Her conduct the night before, that morning, up to the last hour even, had been above reproach; but now the old spell was closing around her again with redoubled power, and its force frightened her. She kept telling herself that they must go home, but she had no wish ever to see the place again. All that she cared for in life was with her then. She was willing for everybody and everything else to be blotted

out of it. Even Firenze was of no account. Only her oath would bind them in the future. Not that her love for her had waned in any great measure. In spite of all that she had suffered at her hands it remained much the same. It was that for Howard which had assumed such alarming proportions, and raging within her threatened to burst all bonds. For the first time she was able to feel real sympathy for her sister. Repeatedly the poor creature, half-mad for the time being, had cried, "Oh! you don't know what the craving is." She began to think that she did know, that their two troubles were near akin. When she looked back on the self-inflicted misery of the last year she began also to doubt the wisdom of it. The self-same night that she came home from Mrs. Copley's *ivrogne de joie* she had seen fit to fell her new-found happiness in one ruthless stroke at her feet. The doctor had often told her that to withhold drink entirely from Firenze at once would kill her. Yet that was what she had done in her own case, and it *had* well-nigh killed her. A tree struck by lightning may be said to live in that its outline still appears in the landscape. Only those who look close see that all vigour and colour are gone from it.

And now that she had seen him again the reaction was almost too much for her. Overdue joy came too late. Spent with grief at the time of bereavement the principal actor usually is found at the anti-climax exhausted, callous. Not so with Grey. Negative though her happiness was it surged within her refusing to be quelled. It threatened to take possession of her and sweep her off her feet. All her reserve force of the resistance upon which she prided herself must be pressed into service now. For the first time it was brought home to her that her resources might come to an end.

Firenze clamoured for drink kept out of sight under

lock and key; and it was death to her. *She*, parched for the love placed tantalisingly within her reach, might not say the word which should give it to her. And it was Life's crown.

How insanely she worshipped him. It was all that she could do not to put out her hand and caress the dark head which she had caressed so often before. He lay with his face turned towards her, remembering her liking for smoke. She was seized with a longing, too, to tell him the whole wretched story, and abide by his advice. She knew well enough what it would be. He would not absolve her from her promise, childish and invalid though it was, but he would fling aside his work and stand by her till her term of imprisonment had expired.

Instead, she remained mute, her tongue refusing alike to utter either commonplace or confidence. She looked at him covertly every now and then under pretence of keeping an eye on the horses, and wished that she could find something to say. Their former terms of intimate silence ought strenuously to be avoided. To avert such a catastrophe she pulled herself together and announced apologetically that she was tired and sleepy. Riding home she was so short with him that she was half afraid that he might see how much she cared.

CHAPTER XXI.

But in your bitter world, she said,
 Face joy's a costly mask to wear
 And bought with pangs long nourished
 And rounded to despair.
 Grief's earnest makes life's play, she said.
 —E. B. BROWNING.

THEY hardly met again, as lovers construe the word, until the dance. Howard imagined that they two would be obliged to spend the greater part of the next two days in riding over the country-side with the invitations. Instead, he went alone, only too glad to be of some small use to the two women who were apparently working so hard for the good of their guests, yet wondering what ulterior motive Grey could have for throwing herself so keenly into the whole business. It was not on his account, he was certain, since she now put him on an indifferent footing, which caused him to see the advisability of asking her for a couple of dances at most. The likelihood of there being some other attraction was a question which could only be determined on the night itself.

In reality, neither of the sisters did much towards the arrangements. Firenze, as usual, assumed a telling air of valuable organisation and watched others slaving, and Grey had not the heart for anything. For the first time in her life she hung back in her collar and allowed Mrs. Hunter to do most of the work. Many and many an hour when she was supposed to be in the basement

she spent in her own room perfectly idle, as the term goes, since she was not using her hands. Day and night she paced up and down, throwing herself on the bed every now and then from sheer exhaustion. She had not slept two consecutive hours since Howard's advent, and her head ached nearly as much as her heart.

The arrival of Mimi Hope amongst what Mr. Coleman termed the best party that could be procured in the time had not at first helped to lighten her yoke. She was not nearly as pretty as Agnes Harding, and evinced no desire for male society, but Grey knew that she was the only girl at the dance likely to appeal to Howard. Every woman suffers in a greater or less degree from jealousy. Under individual treatment it can become a diversity of things. Grey fashioned hers into an altar of self-sacrifice, which, if it fell short of causing the two to be thrown together, certainly did not prevent it.

She always divided girls into two classes. Those who hunted and those who did not, and never found any difficulty in gauging their characters accordingly; but Mimi could not be said to come under either heading. She was a good rider. It was immaterial to her what sort of a horse was allotted to her, when Grey suggested her riding with Howard, yet she did not give the idea of the modern sportswoman. The truth was that she was one of those rare women who belong to no particular type. She was not a beauty, although, given position and money, she might easily have been boomed into one. Neither was she an ascetic, in spite of a pure face and earnest eyes which spoke of high thought and purpose. A rigorous Churchwoman, she yet derived a certain amount of pleasure from Society; but what struck Grey most forcibly about her was that she was not one to wax enthusiastic over anything. The common opinion was

that she was *blasé*. Grey drew her own conclusions. In extreme cases of surfeit and starvation the symptoms hardly differ. The girl should be forced into enjoying her visit in spite of herself, and the companionship of Howard seemed the only way of bringing it to pass. The fact that she had singled Mimi out from the other girls was sufficient cause to enlist his interest in her. He did his best to amuse her.

Virtue brings its own reward. In the leaden time which hung on her hands Grey had ample leisure for watching the two from a distance, but the sight gave her no real pain. It would have been impossible for her to love Howard as she did unless she had had absolute faith in him. She was sitting at the bureau in her room the afternoon of the dance when Mimi knocked at the door and came in. The two had hardly exchanged a word since the party assembled; they had never met before, but the elder girl from the first had felt strangely drawn to Grey.

"I came to see if I can help you with whatever you are doing, or is it some secret trade that you carry on that you are so much alone? Coining, or smuggling, or dyeing your hair?"

Grey smiled.

"Stay and talk to me, if you can? I have finished my work."

"But seriously, why couldn't you have done it downstairs? It does seem such a shame that we've all been here for two days and you have hardly put in an appearance."

"It was very rude of me, but, of course, you understand that there is a good deal to do the first time one breaks out into a frivol?"

"Yes, I do understand, because we have given big balls in Town, and I have been the only daughter avail-

able to look after the high and mighty London servants. So, you see, I know something about it, and I don't believe that there has been the slightest necessity for your running away with such a good old-fashioned butler and housekeeper. Now, what have you done since luncheon? Taken these weighty programmes out of their box? It was not fit occupation for the drawing-room was it?"

Their eyes met.

"I think that Mr. Howard's the nicest man I ever met," said Mimi suddenly.

Grey knew that her face was suffused in blushes.

"I'm glad you like him. I thought that you would. He's getting on splendidly at the Foreign Office, and is quite comfortably off."

"Green-horn! I'm not going to fall in love with him, or even marry him."

"You said that he was the nicest man you ever met?"

"So he is, but to tell you the truth there is some one else that I happen to care for. He's not nearly as good a man as Mr. Howard, but that never makes any difference with us women, does it?"

"Of course not."

"I don't know what you will think of me, but I'm not going until you have answered a certain question. Why are you wasting your time so wilfully you two, when you are both longing to be with each other every minute of the day? Go down to him now. He is alone in the library."

"No, no! I can't."

She had forgotten to feign indignant surprise at Mimi's words. They were true enough, but a little presence of mind, she did not doubt, would have made her mistress of the situation.

"Oh! I have no patience with people who won't make the best use of such golden opportunities—they come so seldom. Go, take my advice."

Grey shook her head.

Mimi crossed over to her and took her by the hand.

"It's not a time for diffidence or bashfulness. I know the feeling well, but I give you my solemn word that he cares for you. I noticed you both the first night at dinner, total strangers to me though you were. It is only the chance of speaking that he is waiting for. Oh! just go down to the library to fetch a book, and think of afterwards and to-morrow."

"Oh! you don't understand. It is over long ago. We were engaged and something came between."

"Another woman?"

"No. I can't explain. It is not my secret to tell you, but I want you to understand that the decision is absolutely irrevocable."

"You are positive? There is no mock pride keeping you apart, or some puerile misunderstanding?"

"No. Pride was always an impossibility between him and me. I threw all proper feeling to the winds when I met him, and flung myself headlong into his arms."

"But I don't quite know why he is here?"

"Firenze asked him. He happened to be staying in the village."

"Happened! my dear child. Busy London men do not accidentally find themselves in smelly cottages like those we passed yesterday. There is something more in the background of which you know nothing."

"If there is it won't make any difference. Don't make it harder for me, and promise that you will never let any one know what I have told you. Nobody has any idea that there has ever been anything between us."

Not even Firenze and Edward. Mr. Howard believes that he is no longer more to me than a friend. Don't undo the work of the last few days by dropping so much as a hint of the truth. You will only make my life more unbearable than it already is if you do."

"On my honour I won't, but we are not at all likely to touch on the subject, however friendly we become. He is not a man given to confidences, I can see."

"No, I suppose not. I think that he must have allowed them all to accumulate for me."

"And a second edition is accumulating for you now. It may all come right in the end, and even if it doesn't you have the knowledge of his love."

"That is not much consolation."

"Why, it ought to be everything. Listen, I will tell you something that I have never told a human being. From babyhood I have never loved but one man. I cannot even remember whether he ever asked me to marry him. The question did not seem necessary, but we were engaged when I was still in the school-room. A year or two later some one made mischief between us. He went off to India without bidding me good-bye, and married the first woman who made love to him out of pique; she is not a nice woman, and too late he discovered the truth. I have never seen him since. I never will, but the knowledge that in his heart he has not changed to me fills my soul with unspeakable peace. Nothing can touch me now."

"Oh! I am not like that. I wish I were. Since he came I have carefully avoided him. It was best, but if things had been different we should have been inseparable. Every minute spent away from him seems wasted. If some divining power told me that matters would right themselves in a couple of years, although I should only be twenty-one then, the thought of all this precious

time thrown away would still rankle. Oh! I want him, I want him now, now, for always until death comes for one of us, and that would be hardly long enough. The longest span of life would seem too short. Oh! if only I could feel as you do. Nothing ever calms me or quenches the burning fire inside me."

"Why not lay your burden at the foot of the Cross?"

"I have tried. If it had not been for that I could not have struggled on at all, but it is not enough. It shames me to think that there are black days when if the choice of him and my God were given me I should choose him. Those others, when I feel glad that Christ has singled me out and allowed me to suffer so much for His sake, are terribly few."

"You are too young for such trouble. How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"A child."

"But He loved children. It is a great consolation to be reckoned amongst the chastened loved ones. When I was in London I used to go to the Children's Hospital sometimes. In spite of their bodily pain it used to strike me that they were less to be pitied than some of the Society butterflies who used to put in a few minutes' visiting as 'fire insurance' now and again. I said as much to one of the nurses, and she told me that a notorious music-hall star had owned to envying the patients, and said, 'They have to grin and bear it, poor mites; but at least they have their work cut out for them and know where they are. We healthy ones are entrusted with a bale of cloth, as it were, and have to turn it to the best advantage.'"

"And you and I will have to grin and bear it to-night, Grey. Can you grin satisfactorily?"

"Like a pantomime mask, if necessary. I'll be as

talkative as a hair-dresser to-night you'll see ; and don't despise me, but I intend to flirt desperately."

"Oh! don't. What will he think?"

"That's just it. It will be for his good that I shall do it. People are not much given to flirting to please themselves. I mean him to forget me, to lose faith in me ; why should his life be ruined as well as mine ? I can't believe that any woman who really loved a man would ever try to prevent him from marrying just because she couldn't marry him herself. The dog in the manger was not a she-dog, if you remember. If I can succeed in deceiving him for once it will be a great achievement."

Mimi whipped out a note-book.

"I'll bet you a tenner that you don't succeed."

"Oh! I couldn't bet about this, if you don't mind. But I tell you that this is not an ordinary case. My love for him will carry me through. See if it doesn't."

"Come, be practical. A woman who deliberately sets to work in cold blood to bamboozle her lover should not be troubled with anything like *arrière pensées*! There's the tea-bell, and look at my hair. I wish you would bet. Ten pounds is a nice little sum ; it would buy me a wig."

"Yes, it would ; but I think it would have to be a white one by the time that you won."

CHAPTER XXII.

Was it a friend or foe that spread these lies?
 Nay, who but infants question in this wise?
 'Twas one of my most intimate enemies.

—D. G. ROSSETTI.

"As I have told you all along, little woman, the only objection that I have to this show is that it is out of drawing. There is no kind of proportion about it. You ask your friends informally at three days' notice to come to quite a large dance. It's on the same principle as putting new cloth into old garments, which no one is ever supposed to do."

"No one has, up to date, but I think that it's a rather good idea of mine. If I had a darn and some kind soul sewed a new silk stocking on to it as a surprise for me I should make my best charity bob and say 'thank 'ee.' If these good people come prepared to eat oranges I can only say that I don't think they'll grumble when they see this."

She tossed the supper *menu* across at him.

"My dear child, the food's quite a secondary consideration, for it's only supposed to concern the men, but the women will come in old frocks, and there'll be the devil to pay."

"So they will. Teddy, that's the only practical thing you've said since I married you. Grey, it's your party. I suppose you didn't give them an inkling that it was going to be a respectable ball-dance? We might have put 'Respectable' on the cards, if we had thought."

"It must be an awful business giving a dance," said Howard.

"In Town it is," said Mimi. "You think of a number, double it, take away the first number that you thought of from it, and nothing but dowagers and detrimentials remain."

"Well, this is going to be a very nice dance," said Grey. "I, for one, mean to enjoy myself hugely. I'm even enjoying myself now trying to seem as if I liked Mr. Coleman to crush my best gown, and looking at those beautiful ladies in the almanacs. Why don't we have them in the dining-room, Firenze, instead of those old brown ancestors?"

"Fancy having brown ancestors! It makes one think of monkeys. Now my first granny was a lovely pink person, by name Pandora. I am descended from the original hope which she kept tame in a box with her clothes."

They were dining in the housekeeper's room, huddled together on a couple of benches like so many school children, as jolly a party as could be met with in a day's march. No one was gayer than Grey, and Mimi bravely supported her.

Grey left the table early for a final look at the dining-room floor, and Captain Cardigan soon followed to help her to dance it in. He had only arrived that day, and she had commenced her siege of him at once, fancying that he would be less likely to feel any evil effects than any other man. He was another of the harmless soldiers belonging to what she was pleased to designate the "block system." "Any block of wood with a head to it" was Fielding's idea of a captain. Grey endorsed it, and proceeded to treat him more as an image whittled out of a stick than a flesh-and-blood man. He sat next her at dinner, and she found him easier to get

on with than any one she ever remembered. It may have been that the fact that Howard was opposite caused her to take extra pains with him. Her powers of conversation never deserted her all night. Howard, watching the people arrive from a corner, noted that she had a little prize-giving smile and speech for all. She appeared to have given away more dances in the first few minutes than the whole programme contained, and he had not the slightest idea whether she would give him one or not when he leisurely went up to ask her.

"Have you anything to spare for an old friend, Miss Alison?"

"Yes, No. 6."

"A polka?"

"It's all I have."

"Can't you give me a valse later on?"

"Oh! the fourth extra. They come in the middle."

"Thank you."

He felt that she had no intention of dancing it with him, and sure enough, when he appeared in one doorway at the opening bars of "Doctrinen" she was hurrying down to supper by another with Captain Cardigan. He could not understand her. There was no marked coolness between them. On the contrary, he fancied that she was quite willing to accept him *en bon camarade* for the future. He had certainly not been guilty of the offence of flying at higher game, and fancied that some small reward was due to him in consequence. Yet he had no tangible grievance against her. They had danced an excellent polka, never once stopping from start to finish, and if the sitting-out interval had been somewhat syncopated by Grey's introduction of some strangers to each other it was only what any good hostess would have done.

How he hated the whole thing. The Blue Hun-

garians, a perfect floor, and the soft summer breeze at the windows issuing broadcast invitations to explore the illuminated gardens. Above all, the one woman. And all the time he longed for the over-heated congested romp and the magnetic boards of Mandeville House. The hours dragged heavily, but he did his duty manfully, struggling with deeply-rooted wall-flowers as lightly as if they had been the most feathery "what's o'clocks," turning compliments out of the roughest material, conducting dyspeptic dowagers by the shortest route to supper, yet conscious throughout that the end of his visit was at hand and that he hardly knew whether he would be sorry to go or glad. Another vexed question was whether Grey were enjoying herself. They met at every turn. From the moment when she ran up to him with apparent sincerity to apologise for missing his dance it seemed that he could not lose sight of her and Cardigan. They were his *vis-à-vis* in the lancers, and when he at last allowed himself the luxury of a cigarette outside Grey brushed past him laden with canoe cushions on her way to the moat. It occurred to him for one moment to retaliate by a spurious flirtation with Agnes Harding, the most beautiful woman in the room and an unmarried mass of emotion and electricity which few men could withstand.

Howard ranked with the minority. After the first night of her arrival, when she had taken possession of his palm and insisted upon delineating it, he had hardly spoken to her. She was a bad loser, but she had not given up all hope of winning him. He saw her sitting alone in a recess under the stairs, hiding, doubtless, from some badgering boy. She was well able to take care of herself, and the evening had to be lived through somehow. Just then a peal of Grey's laughter reached him. He spued the contemptible thought out of his mind

and deliberately stood within a few yards of Agnes Harding till the dance finished. In the house-party lancers he had watched her and Mimi Hope and Grey link arms together—three distinct sorts of women, as easy to read as leaded type, and all in love.

Grey, with life; Mimi, complacent and easy-going, with anything that she was asked to be; and Agnes Harding, with marriage, the agent immaterial. And the last analysis was the only true one.

The band was still playing extras when he went back to the ball-room, and Grey and Cardigan were amongst the few couples dancing. Grey was conspicuously lively; for her, almost rowdy. He suddenly remembered that he was engaged to a full-blown blossom in the corner, who ran round his shins till the music stopped. Having restored his crimson rambler intact to her bower he went in search of Firenze. His one consolation during these days had been in talking to her, and it was only natural that Grey should come a good deal into their conversation since he knew her first. Hitherto it had not occurred to Firenze how incessantly he harped upon the one theme. She had taken a violent liking to Howard, and so long as he proved willing to talk to her instead of to the other women in the house she was content. Their mutual fondness for Grey was a great link between them as strangers, but now that they were more intimate she was a little piqued by his conservative adherence to the subject. When he met her on the stairs coming up from supper and asked her to sit out instead of dancing she took the suggestion to herself. She was looking her best in pale pink with diamond wings in her hair, and she intended that he should tell her so. She took him up to the Rose Room, and sank into her favourite chair. A delicious sense of inertia was creeping over her. After a spell of comparative tem-

perance she had just been downstairs to fortify herself with half a bottle of champagne.

Howard shut the door, and wheeled a chair into a confidential position.

"Your sister seems to be enjoying herself?"

"Oh, yes; she is in great form, and her frock suits her, doesn't it?"

The expected answer was obvious. He revoked her lead deliberately.

"I don't think that I have ever seen her so lively. She strikes me as being almost unnaturally animated to-night, but, of course ——"

"Oh! tell me something more interesting, or I warn you that I shall go to sleep. Do you know that you always talk to me about Grey? She's a good little soul, but she's with me all the year round, so suppose we don't talk what amounts to 'shop' any more."

Howard rose and stood looking down at her, with one arm resting on the mantel-shelf.

"Mrs. Beaumont, you have been very good to me, and I want to ask you something in confidence. It is not an easy thing to say, but I can't keep silent any longer."

Firenze was all attention. He had fallen in love with Grey and was about to ask her to plead his cause, and they would be married and she would be left alone. Such a possibility as Grey ever wanting to marry had never occurred to her for an instant. She could not bear the thought of desertion. It would be an act of gross selfishness on Grey's part to suggest it.

"I daresay you have wondered what brought me here to this remote part before the end of the session. The truth sticks in my throat, but I must tell you. A week or two ago I was told on trustworthy authority that your sister since we last met had developed a liking for drink."

He paused. Firenze heaved a mental sigh of relief. He had said nothing of love or marriage. This was not a proxy proposal after all, yet surely it was tantamount to one. A disinterested man would hardly have left his work to ascertain the truth of a rumour.

"I had no wish to pry into her private affairs. I came because we had struck up a friendship in Town. One naturally likes to stand by a friend. The journey seemed worth it, because if there is no foundation in the report I shall have the satisfaction of contradicting it, and if it should happen to be true I think that I might be instrumental in curing her. And I am terribly afraid that it is true. Her aged appearance, her black eye and excitability all point to it. Heaven grant that I may be wrong."

Firenze hardly heard what he was saying. The time was at hand when she must make up her mind in a serious juncture unaided. His words conveyed little to her, but she was not too dazed to note the indisputable love on his face. This man had come to steal Grey, her prop and mainstay. He cared for her. Whether Grey also cared for him was altogether outside the question, since she believed him capable of making any woman love him. To give her her due she did not think that Grey did care for him except as a reliable friend. It seemed to her that it would be so much better an arrangement if she could contrive to keep him on the present footing and continue to share him with her sister. One word from her and the matter would be settled. No man would wish to marry a woman with such an affliction. She saw how eagerly he awaited her answer. She bent her head. The tortoise-shell handle of her feather fan snapped asunder in her tightening grasp. She asked herself what was the thing that she was about to do. A well trained conscience answered

promptly, "Tell a white lie which will hurt nobody, and on the contrary do a great deal of good."

"Yes, it is true. I should never have told you if you had not asked me. I have never mentioned this subject to anybody. I don't know how you heard it. It was most kind of you to come, but if you take my advice you won't waste precious time by trying to cure her. Every one has a different system, but they all fail—just like a roulette system, except in a rare instance when the patient possesses an enormous capital of will and brains to draw on. A quiet country life is the best treatment for these sad cases. The only other alternative is one of those terrible homes, and I have not the heart to send her there. Here she has individual love and care which she could not possibly get anywhere else."

"You have a good doctor?"

"Yes, a true friend who looks upon us both more or less as his own children."

"And what does he say?"

She shook her head.

"He is not very sanguine of success, but, of course, we hope for the best."

Howard went nearer to her.

"Poor little woman! what a life for you. Who, seeing you, would dream for an instant what you have to suffer?"

Firenze's eyes filled with tears. She was beginning to be terribly sorry for herself, too.

"I'm glad that you know. Things seem worse when you can't talk of them."

"Most people would find them insupportable. Well, now you have a safety-valve in me. There is no question of disloyalty to poor little Grey in the case. I forced your confidence."

"And you will stand by me, won't you? I have so few friends. You won't let any one turn you against me?"

"Why, of course not; but no one is at all likely to try."

"Grey might. Don't misunderstand me. We are the best of friends, but sometimes we have words and she says things for which I know she is heartily sorry after. I wouldn't mind if they were true, but, of course, truth is not the strong point with these poor creatures. If you were to go to her now and tell her that you knew everything she would probably deny it in the face of the most convincing evidence."

"Yet she seems quite rational. There are other girls here to-night who are just as noisy from a mere superabundance of animal spirits, only it sits badly on her somehow."

"Oh! she is practically all right to-night, she won't feel any bad effects to-morrow. She will just jump on her horse and ride the cobwebs away. Those most concerned in these cases suffer least."

"Does she fight it much," he asked hoarsely. "From what I know of her I should have thought that she would have fought it to the death."

"I'm afraid not; but, to tell the truth, we hardly ever discuss the subject. There are occasionally scenes which serve to clear the air. She seems to be a very contented girl, living quite happily in the present, and fortunately there have been no love affairs to complicate matters."

"She seems to be very popular with men."

"Oh! she is. She likes them all to pass the time with, and they find her quite attractive. She's rather a pretty little thing, I always think; but what I mean is that there has never been any one serious. She knows

how to flirt, but her own wings have never been singed. Now we must go down and look after these silly people, I suppose."

"Then this is practically good-bye. I leave by the first train to-morrow. Will you write to me sometimes and tell me how she is, and if things should get worse and you want an expert opinion remember that I live on the spot and will do anything in my power to help."

"Oh! how good you are. Come back soon and cheer me up, and don't forget that this is a state secret. Even Ted doesn't know."

The beginning of the end was apparent as they went downstairs. Cups of steaming soup were being handed to the parting guests. Firenze went amongst them to speed them on their way with the little apt speeches for which she was noted. Howard went into the ball-room. The "Blue Danube" held every remaining couple in a vice. Satin shoes challenged patent-leather pumps determined to die hard, backed up by a rear-guard of defunct collars and mutilated flounces.

Sitting alone, hugging her bouquet, was Grey. He crossed over to her.

"Will you finish this dance with me?"

"I am too footsore."

"So am I. Let us sit it out."

That was worse. She jumped up.

"No, let us dance it. I can but fall down."

"I will not let you do that."

He wondered then if she were afraid of reeling, and put his arm firmly round her. Once give suspicion a hearing and it becomes a pestering beggar never off the door-step. They started without futile preamble, each falling as easily into the other's step as if they were regular partners. Grey was her old quiet self again. Whenever he was with her her whole bearing gave doubt

the lie. If any one but her sister had told him the worst he would have been inclined to think that his own eyes and ears had played him false ; that there was some hideous mistake about the whole affair. Neither of them spoke or showed a sign of langour. Mimi Hope, standing in the doorway, noticed the look of peace that had settled on their faces. Both seemed transfigured since she had last seen them together. She slipped round to the conductor and asked him to play five minutes longer. She dared not make it more. It was little enough, but she knew how often love has to climb down in its demands ; clamouring for years and accepting hours.

"Will you come into the garden," Howard asked her when the music stopped, "I have something that I must say to you."

She could not imagine what it could be, but there was nothing for it but to let him have his say. She followed him across the lawn to the moat. Under an oak the punt lay moored. Along the edge a row of fairy lights hung on a wire a foot or so from the ground.

"Mind your dress. Let me help you."

In an instant he had lifted her quickly over the barrier and placed her amongst the cushions. He wrapped a rug round her shoulders, and lit a cigarette. It might help him with what he had to say.

"I expect that you wondered what brought me here. It must have struck you as being beastly bad form under the circumstances. I came because I heard that you were in a hole. I didn't believe it, but I came up on the off-chance that if you were I might help to pull you out. Well, I'm afraid that there is some little truth in what I heard, and I do hope that you will let me help you. I know naturally far more about the thing than you do, besides being older and stronger. I know that I have no

right to talk to you like this, but, perhaps, the past has given me a sort of suzerainty over you, so do let me help you just as an ordinary friend. It wouldn't put you under any obligation to me. I shouldn't look for any reward—you understand?"

"I don't in the least know what you are talking about. It's very kind of you to want to help me, but I'm not in any hole that I know of. We all have our little troubles, of course, but sometimes we are obliged to bear them alone without bothering other people."

"But we are not always strong enough to bear them alone. What could you be expected to stand, a little bit of a thing like you?"

"I have sometimes thought that I could stand anything, anything!"

"I know that you are a good plucked 'un, but the case in point is an exception. That particular path is so beset with dragons that it takes fighting men all their time even to make a fair defence. Come, what is the good of you and me beating about the bush and wasting time. You know what I have in my mind, and that I want to talk to you earnestly about this dreadful drink business."

She started perceptibly. He felt the punt pushed away from the bank until the creaking chain held it back.

"Don't think for an instant that I am going to preach at you, or that I blame you in the slightest degree. I only want you to place yourself unreservedly in my hands. Two heads are better than one. Together, I am convinced that we can do great things."

"Tell me what you heard."

Very gently he told her all except his recent conversation with Firenze.

"I don't see that you have much of a case. The third-hand evidence of a maid, a black eye and a fit of

giddiness the night you arrived. Are these the ingredients that go to make a drunkard? If so, the whole world must be one huge dipsomaniac establishment."

"I will be quite candid with you, because I know of old how implicitly I can trust you. I should never have attached so much importance to these examples if your sister had not corroborated what I heard. Knowing that you are all-in-all to each other I confided my fears to her and she told me all."

"She told you that I drink—Firenze?"

Her horrified voice rang out on the night air, drowning the sound of the cornet in the ball-room opposite.

"Hush! She was not to blame. She was the soul of loyalty. She only told me under great pressure."

Grey started to her feet. By the faint glimmer of the last remaining fairy light he saw her face. The wild staring eyes were those of a mad woman.

"It's a lie. I offer no explanation. You may think what you like, but I swear to you in ——"

He seized her wrist.

"I half expected this. You are over-excited. You don't know what you are saying. Sit down; let us talk the matter over coolly."

"You don't believe me even now? Oh, Charlie! you of all men don't believe me, and before God I am telling the truth."

She broke from him, sprang out of the punt over the wire and ran across the lawn into the house.

When he saw her again she was galloping wildly round the room with Captain Cardigan, singing snatches of "John Peel" at the top of her voice and challenging the house-party to race her. When they all went down to supper she was still the only lively one.

"Oh! a horse-shoe table, how lucky; shall I throw it over my left shoulder?"

Then standing on her chair she put one foot on the table-cloth and drank to "Fox-hunting." One of the hired waiters had filled her glass with champagne. She tossed it off without noticing what it was. Howard on her right, whispered to her to be quiet. She turned her back on him and flicked a bread pellet at Mr. Coleman's bald head. When the ladies rose from the table Howard followed them up into the hall and lighted Grey's candle for her.

"Good-night and good-bye if I don't see you in the morning."

"You may and you may not. I won't make any rash promises; about seven o'clock I expect I shall find that I like my bed better than anything in the world."

She looked round and saw that every one else had gone.

"Promise me never to come back here unless I ask you."

"I promise."

Then she picked up her trailing skirt and hurried after the others.

Burton had gone to bed. She went into Mimi's room to be unlaced.

Both the girls were lost in thought; at last Grey spoke.

"I think that I should have won our wager," Grey said at last. "I did my work well."

She held out her hand, but not in exultation.

"You will have to do it a bit better yet, baby. Did you happen to see his face when you bade him good-bye?"

"No. I—I didn't look at him—I couldn't."

An hour later, just as Mimi was getting into bed, a tearful little face peeped in at the door.

"I want to ask you a great favour. May I sit by

your window all night? I'll be as quiet as a mouse. My room looks out to the back."

When Howard drove away at half-past eight he did not look up. Grey's windows, he knew, faced the other way.

If he had he might have seen a bowed figure still in her ball-dress.

CHAPTER XXIII.

To go on for ever and fail, and go on again
 And be mauled to the earth and arise;
 And contend for the shade of a word
 And a thing not seen with the eyes,
 With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night
 That somehow the right is the right
 And the smooth shall bloom from the rough.
 Lord! if that were enough.

—R. L. S.

A LAPSE of nine years with nothing worthy of record.

When one keeps a journal with a view to public perusal it is essential that each day some trivial variation should be notified. Strict routine is death to the biographer. If the time comes when the whole day's work is summed up by "the same as yesterday," then "ditto," lastly a blank, it is best to throw down the pen and await the turn of the tide.

It was a sultry day in August. Not a breath of air either inside the house or out. Dark, lowering clouds hovered overhead like great birds of prey ready to swoop down to earth at any minute. A thunderstorm was imminent. Distant rumbling told of artillery being drawn up into position. Grey was sitting in the window-seat of the Rose Room considering the ways and means of living through another day. She had planned a walk on the moor with the dogs before Firenze came down, but it was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead, and the thought of the thunder frightened her. In the old days she would never have changed her plans for the

most turbulent weather. She would have walked or ridden through the thickest part of the wood with fool-hardy courage. Now her nerves were all to pieces. In spite of early hours and simple living she was almost as broken down as Firenze. There was little to choose between the keeper and the patient. At the sound of a highly-pitched voice or the lowering of the blinds she could often have screamed aloud. Even her indomitable pluck in the hunting-field had almost vanished; she went nearly as straight as ever, but all the time with her heart in her mouth riding for a fall. Terrible nightmares haunted her before she went out, yet she could not have put a name to what she feared. Life had so little charm for her that she no longer clung to it. She would often murmur fractionally to herself, "Oh! I don't know what I do want."

She was still sitting in the same position fidgeting absently with the blind-cord when Beaumont came in, and blurted out, "It's done. I've given up the hounds, and Billy Moore has taken them."

"Edward! Not for good?"

"Yes. It's been a bit of a wrench. There isn't finer blood in any pack in England, but I can't stand it any longer. I'm off."

"For how long?"

"Six months at least, perhaps a year. You don't think me a brute, do you? I have tried to be very patient with her. For ten years I have been bandied about like a shuttlecock between resolutions of flight and forgiveness. You yourself know how many fresh starts I have given her and how much good they have done."

"You have been very lenient with her. Many a man would have left her long ago."

She could not bring herself to urge him to stay.

Without his hounds his life would be unbearable. To improving their breed he had given all his leisure. He had never been a man to do things by halves, holding it "better to pursue a frivolous trade by serious means than a sublime art frivolously." His standard of a husband was the same. On the day of his marriage he had laid his life unreservedly at his wife's feet. He could hardly be blamed that after continued abuse of the gift he had determined to take back such of it as remained and try his luck elsewhere for a time.

"It's you I'm thinking of. I don't think that you are fit to be left alone with her. Hewitt thinks so, too. I wish you would get a nurse."

"She would not stand it for long."

"*You* stand it."

"It is different for me. She is my sister. I will do all that I can for her, and then you will come back the sooner."

"Oh! if you could. I went up just now and told her that I was going away to-morrow. She is in a pitiable state, sobbing her heart out, but I don't know if the tears are genuine or only the result of yesterday."

"I can't imagine how she got anything yesterday."

"She bribed the new kitchen-maid."

"She was not out of my sight for five minutes all day."

"I thought that she went down to the game larder."

"I went with her."

"She found time at any rate to slip a note and half a crown into the girl's hand. She swore to me on her knees that she had had nothing, and the next minute rolled over helpless on the floor."

He paced up and down the room, then stopped before a pastel of his wife.

"Shall I give her another trial? If you can stay with

her why should not I? I married the poor child for better, for worse. There is not one word in the whole Bible that enjoins a man to put away his wife for drink. And it isn't as if she didn't love me. The way she clung to me just now quite unnerved me. She has never been so vehement before. If only I could think that she is really sorry this time I would stay."

Just then Firenze came into the room. By a stupendous effort she had risen a couple of hours sooner than usual, and in spite of the excesses of the preceding day seemed to be quite cheerful. She was always more French than English in her manner, and the Gallic temperament makes light of trouble, permitting even tea-gardens in the corners of their cemeteries.

"How early you are," said Grey. "Do you want the fire? It's a horrid muggy day. I can hardly breathe."

Firenze pulled her Shetland shawl more tightly round her.

"Yes, I must have the fire. No, do let me light it. I have told Ted that from to-day I am going to turn over a new leaf and do my own housekeeping and all sorts of things. It is so long since I have done anything useful."

She appeared so seldom in the searching morning light that even the two who saw her every day were quite shocked at the change in her. None of her Paris friends would have recognised her. Her hair had lost all its lustre, the mottled purple complexion was only accentuated by the layers of powder, and every graceful line from the figure had vanished. Her one style of dress was a floppy tea-gown made without any attempt at fit or smartness. The pointed shoes had given place to velvet slippers. Comfort was all that she wished for now, and it was the last thing that she was likely to get.

She walked slowly towards a table in search of

matches. Her foothold still seemed uncertain. She seemed glad to rest against the table for a minute, then by slow degrees knelt down on the hearth-rug. It was years since she had knelt. She never prayed. It was with difficulty that she suppressed a cry at the shooting-pains in her gouty joints. She seemed to lack the strength to strike a match. Her hand trembled as she rubbed it lightly on the side of the box, and it fell from her loosening grasp. She buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Beaumont came to the rescue.

"Don't you bother with it, little woman. There are plenty of servants in the house without you dirtying your fingers."

"But I wanted to help you—to show you ——"

"There are plenty of other ways in which you can help me. If you really want to do something for me I wish you would make me some spills for the library. Nobody makes such good ones as you do." He hated spills. The idea of going to a house and coming upon one's handwriting suddenly was as bad as being confronted unexpectedly with one's reflection in a glass, but he could not think of any other occupation sufficiently trivial for her. He led her tenderly downstairs, and supplied her with a bundle of old letters. Enderby came to him for instructions about his packing. He told him that it was uncertain whether he would be able to go on the morrow.

After luncheon he took Firenze for a drive. Grey, still feeling stifled in mind and body, was standing on the steps before the front-door watching the ominous clouds when Beaumont drove slowly past the gate on his way to the stables. He pulled up, and called her to him.

"I wish you'd hang about outside the church for Firenze. She's gone in there for a few minutes. I am

not going to-morrow. She has been more like her old self this afternoon than I have ever known her."

The shortest way into the churchyard was through the door in the wall by the laburnum tree. Grey sauntered along the path, and then stood outside the porch in readiness for her sister. She did not look into the church at first. She could not bring herself to intrude upon Firenze's silent meditation, but after a time she turned and looked through the wire netting which was always lowered in the open doorway in hot weather, and saw that the church was empty. It was so small that in one quick glance she could see the two short rows of pews and the altar steps. There was certainly no one there, but to make sure she pushed open the wire door and walked up the aisle to the old Alison pew under the pulpit. Behind the faded curtains they had both slept so often as children that there was just the chance that she might be crouched in one corner of it, but she was not there.

The iron gate leading on to the road stood open. She must, undoubtedly, have gone in and out that way soon after Edward left her. With a growing fear in her heart Grey ran round to the front door. Beaumont was just coming back from the stables.

"She's not in the church."

"She must have come in almost immediately, then. She was very tired. I say, have you seen Snooker's new trick? Here, Snooker; here, boy."

He seemed quite unconcerned, a different man from what he had been in the morning. Grey walked up the steps into the house, but once out of his sight ran upstairs two steps at a time and searched both Firenze's bedroom and the Rose Room in vain. Something told her that she would find her at the Harebell. She had long since lost all self-respect, and would have stooped to drinking

poisonous beer in the bar if given the opportunity. Grey went out of doors again. Beaumont was still on the steps cutting off some of the dead geraniums which stood there in tubs.

"I'm just going to bicycle down to the village. Do you want anything?"

"No; I don't think so. Is she lying down?"

"She's not in her room."

"She may be in the top garden. Don't hurry back. A long ride would do you good."

Grey jumped on her bicycle, and once outside the gate put up her feet and coasted down the hill to the cross-roads. Whizzing along a few yards from the Harebell she saw a woman's figure in the hedge. In horror she put on the brake, and springing to the ground ran back to the spot. She had recognised Firenze's driving-coat, and knew only too well that it was she. At worst she had expected to find that she had bought a bottle of brandy from Mrs. Meek, and instead she was lying incapable by the roadside for any passers-by to see, hugging the half-empty bottle endearingly even in unconsciousness.

Grey bent down and shook her sharply by the shoulder.

"Get up at once, Edward wants you," she shouted into her ear, but she only jabbered some incoherent words and turned over. Then Grey in desperation clasped her arms round her waist and with difficulty raised her to her feet, but only to find that she could not stand.

To summon Edward and take away the bottle seemed the only thing to be done. She left her bicycle beside Firenze and ran up the hill to the house.

Beaumont was enjoying his first cigarette that day, leaning back in his chair in the library.

Grey rushed in, too breathless to speak at first. She pointed to the bottle, thrust it into a cupboard, and clutched him by the hand.

Together they ran down the road. Firenze was lying just as Grey had left her. There was no one in sight. Beaumont took her in his arms and carried her for a few yards like a baby. Grey followed silently with the bicycle. The look in her brother-in-law's face quite frightened her. When they came to the hill they supported Firenze between them to the house. She so often walked with her arm through her husband's that there was nothing unusual in the sight, and, as it happened, it was the servants' tea-time and nobody was about. Between them they took off her hat and coat, and laid her on her bed; then Grey signed to Edward to leave her with her charge. He required no second bidding, and banged the door with the air of a man shaking the dust of an enemy's house from his feet. Grey sat by the bed until the dressing-gong sounded. Both the windows were shut as usual, and the atmosphere resembled a third-rate pot-house more than the room of a lady of fashion. It grew suddenly dark. The summer day showed signs of dying a premature and violent death. Great drops of rain splashed against the window-panes, a flash or two of lightning played about the silver mirror and danced lightly on the backs of the brushes. There was a single clap of thunder accompanied by the wind whistling shrilly like an agitated stage-manager, then a prolonged rolling as of massive scenery; but still Firenze slept on calmly. Grey, with her face buried in the pillow, had it almost in her power to envy her.

The sound of the dressing-gong was very welcome, showing that there was some one astir in the house. The thought of the stairs and passages to be traversed on her way to her room sent a sudden chill to her heart, still more

the idea of the dread dinner with Edward. She rang for Firenze's maid, gave some superfluous explanation of her mistress's sudden indisposition and hurried away to scramble into the first dress that came to hand. Without so much as a look at her hair she ran down to the library. Poor Edward would be in no mood for intrusion, but human companionship was a necessity. If he had not been there she would not have disdained a visit to Enderby in his pantry.

Beaumont was at the writing-table. He did not speak until dinner had been announced some minutes, and Grey watched the rain-drops vaulting the garden wall.

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting," he said at last.

"Not a bit. It's too hot to eat."

He evidently agreed with her. The pair of them trifled with some food for the sake of appearances, but most of the dishes were sent away untouched. Yet the meal seemed interminable. There were no candles on the table. Until late in October they were accustomed to dine by daylight. Every few seconds the whole room was brightly illuminated by natural electric light, but the intervals between each flash seemed black as pitch by comparison. Beaumont hardly spoke. He sat with knitted brows and downcast eyes occasionally jotting down something on his cuff. Grey noticed that he drank a good deal more than usual. He ordered a quart bottle of champagne to be opened, and signed to Enderby to put it on the table at dessert. Had not the subject of the "voluntary madness" been tabooed between them, Grey would have ventured on a mild remonstrance. Instead, she watched in silence the effects of the wine on the man who had hardly broken his fast. He did not appear to enjoy it. He had sufficient excuse for taking a good pick-me-up, but it did not serve to whet his con-

versational powers nor emulate him to effort for Grey's sake. He gulped down glass after glass and sat motionless gazing into the empty fire-place.

Outside, the storm was increasing. Heaven's full orchestra was engaged in a great work, its *magnum opus* it seemed to Grey, as she covered her ears with her hands to deaden the sound of the deafening crescendo and shivered with something of the excitement which she always experienced in listening to grand opera. When the tumult overhead suddenly culminated in a monster crash like the clanging of cymbals she uttered a terrified cry and started to her feet. Beaumont did not so much as turn his head. Grey dragged a chair on to the hearth-rug, and sat with her back to the windows. Enderby came into the room.

"If you please, miss, the pipes has bust, the water is pouring down the stairs and the maids is all crying quite 'istorically."

Grey got up and touched Beaumont on the shoulder. It was like rousing a pig in a sty.

"The water-pipes are burst; what shall we do, turn it off at the main?"

"No; who want's water, filthy stuff!"

She turned to Enderby. The old white-haired man with his quiet bearing seemed to her more of a gentleman than his master.

She had plenty to do in marshalling the maids into order for the next few minutes, she herself setting them an example of calmness by mopping water into a coal-scuttle. In a quarter of an hour at most with so many workers all was in order again. The servants went away to their supper, and Grey was left alone. She sat on the back stairs for a time, then went to hear the latest bulletin of Firenze. The maid, one of Ernestine's many successors was new to the work, and in distress at poor

Mrs. Beaumont's condition. She had been terribly ill, and had not eaten so much as a spoonful of arrowroot. Did not Miss Alison think that a little more brandy would revive her? Miss Alison thought not.

Without so much as looking at the figure in the bed she dragged herself wearily down to the library. Beaumont was snoring like a hog in his hunting-chair. An open cheque-book and files of bills spoke of pending departure, but he was in too sorry a plight to attend to his affairs. When Enderby brought the tray in he asked Grey if the orders for the early train were to hold good. She was always dignified with him.

He had dandled her on his knee as a baby, had many a time lent her money for sweets, scolded her even on occasion. She knew that she had no stauncher ally in the world. She told him to make no change in the arrangements.

"Very good, miss."

He lingered, feigning to set out the glasses, then came forward.

"It's a terrible night this side of the 'ouse, Miss Grey, and the master seems tired. It's very snug in Mrs. 'Unter's room with a south aspic, if you want company. She tells fortunes by the cards something magnificent, better than Miss 'Arding, we all think, asking your pardon; and, *entré noo*, I think she's a bit afraid of thunder."

"No, thanks, Enderby. It's very good of you to think of it, but I think I shall go to bed."

But an hour later she was still there. Beaumont was not in a fit state to be left with the lamps. When ten o'clock struck she awoke him.

"Hallo! Grey, have I been asleep? What has happened?"

"You have made a beast of yourself, but that is neither here nor there—can I help you with your accounts, or are you going to bed?"

"Oh, help me for half-an-hour, there's a good girl."

He apologised humbly to her, and tried to pull himself together; but she soon saw that he was beyond work. His bank would never have passed his signature as he wrote it.

Grey swept his papers into a drawer, locked it, and gave him the key.

"Now go to bed."

He went away like a whipped cur. She turned out the lamps and ran after him. He was glad of her support upstairs. She placed his candle safely in the middle of his dressing-room table, then bade him a curt good-night and ran at her best speed to her room. She was alone with the storm. To be in bed under the clothes was her one thought. She groped for the matches, lighted a couple of candles which were hardly necessary with the ubiquitous lightning, and began to undress with quick sidelong glances at her reflection in the glass.

She was feeling strangely unstrung and immeasurably ashamed of herself. A greater temptation to curtail her Bible reading to a comforting text or two and say her prayers in bed had never come to her, but it was one of the matters on which she felt most strongly. She had made it a rule ever since she was old enough to map out a certain code of right and wrong for herself never to shorten this quiet time. Stupefied with sleep after a ball she sometimes had to bathe her eyes with cold water before she could see to read a word, but whether she went to bed at nine at night or five in the morning the tenet remained unbroken. And it must be the same then. It was the wildest night she ever remembered. The oppressive stillness had given place to a violent gale, and as she knelt there commending herself to her God a sudden gust extinguished one of the candles. There seemed to be phantoms at large. She rose from

her knees telling herself that she was in good keeping and had nothing to fear, but as she crept between the sheets she trembled. Sleep would have been almost impossible to the most courageous in that room. The little bedstead rocked from side to side with each fresh blast, like a tiny cockle-shell at the mercy of the hurricane. With beating heart she tried to free her mind from hampering thoughts and compose herself to rest. She tried to imagine that she was a little child again and her beloved old nurse within earshot in the day-nursery; repeated even a simple hymn lisped so often at her knee, but instead of peaceful oblivion came only the sense of complete isolation. It had never struck her before that she was the only occupant of that landing. Burton's room had been next door, but she had married and now it stood empty. Mrs. Hunter slept in the basement. Poor deaf Bogie in his basket had been great company in the past, but for many a month he had been under the lilac-trees which overlooked his happiest hunting-grounds. Firenze's face appeared for a moment, but was as quickly swept away as that of a distasteful partner in the mirror figure of the cotillon. With both her and her husband under the influence of drink they might just as well not have been in the house. She was under her sister's roof, in the home of her childhood, and there was no one to turn to in case of need. Yet, had Firenze been alone, she would have rushed downstairs and passed the night with her. The company of a drunken sot would have been more bearable than solitude. She rated herself soundly that it should be so. Always in the event of some passing timidity she had buoyed up her frail spirit with thoughts of an unseen Presence which had seemed very near to her. That night the sense of complete loneliness outweighed all else. It was but a tiny sample packet of her whole life.

She had been alone for nine years. The dance had proved to be but a flash in the pan, not a herald of better things. Almost before the last guest had been driven away Firenze was down with one of her worst attacks, and Grey realised the full truth of Dr. Hewitt's mandate that excitement was death to her. The neighbours flocked to Owlcliffe to call without delay, then finding that no fresh gaiety was forthcoming mostly went their own way. Grey discovered then how few friends she had worthy the name. She was popular enough if she chose to go with the stream, but no one troubled to seek her out now that she was down. They were willing enough to laugh with her, but she must cry alone. Almost every link with the past had been severed. Of Howard she had heard nothing all these years. Whether he ever wrote to Firenze she did not try to ascertain. He was never mentioned between the sisters, yet Grey had not charged Firenze with the falsehood which had saddled her with another's burden as well as her own. Since he had believed the worst she had no desire for justice.

She saw his name often in the Society papers, sometimes in the *Gazette*, but looked in vain for it amongst the weddings. It would come some day she never doubted. She knew that he had still loved her in spite of all at the time of the dance. He might still, but since she had to all appearances "gone under" she did not believe that it would prevent him from marrying some one else. It was necessary to his promotion, for one thing. She knew that he was at Vienna, and that the power of an embassy is not lessened by the influence of beautiful and cultured women; remembered also Napoleon's golden maxim to ambassadors, "*Tenez bonne table et soignez les femmes.*" Janet Simmons, who ranked next in her heart, was dead. On the eve of her first visit to Firenze

she had poisoned her hand with her beloved oil paints, and was gone in a few days. Grey had travelled all night to get to her, and had been in time to cheer her last gleams of consciousness with mendacious accounts of Firenze and Edward's love. "Oh! it is the only thing in life," the poor woman had gasped between spasms of pain, and died as she had lived in the happy hallucination that she had for a short time held in a close embrace that which had in reality only brushed her in the passing. And she and Gladys had lost touch, not from intent, but mere force of circumstance. Grey felt that she was best away from Owlcliffe, and she was no longer free to visit her in her own home.

Mimi Hope had taken to heart that sound aphorism, "The only way to get rid of your past is to get a future out of it," and had become a nurse.

Burton was married and the mother of a red-haired son whom she had named Grey.

One by one these ghosts of a dead past haunted her uneasy couch as those of Richard Crookback haunted his on the eve of Bosworth.

Lastly came Beaumont, he who had married her sister for love, and who had once said fiercely to her, "Child, you don't know yet what a man's love is," meaning his own; and now he was going away. He had tired first of the life which had never been as empty as hers. She could not deny that he was fully justified in leaving. She wished only that she could square her conscience and go too. The yearly pilgrimage to Bath, for Firenze's gout treatment, was the only time when she ever left Owlcliffe. On the few occasions when the husband and wife had gone abroad for a few weeks she had used her freedom by staying at home. It was then that she might have gone to Gladys, but she had not the heart. She had long since ceased to pace her cage, and now, when at

rare intervals the door was set open, lacked the spirit to come out. She was best at home amongst her own things, she told herself, meaning not a paraphernalia of feminine luxuries, but her woods and moors and flowers. "As soon as you once come up with a man's limitations it is all over with him," says Emerson, with much truth ; but it is not so with Nature. The more familiar each trait, the more love-worthy. To know to the letter what a man will say, given such and such a question, may be wearily monotonous. To know in absence how a certain hill or tree will be looking, or to verify for one's self just the expected tint on the corn, gives only a sense of stability. Still Grey knew that it would be for her good to go away for a time, and if the chance had been given her again she would have taken it. She had more right than Edward to desert Firenze. Such remnants of gentleness as still remained to her she showed only to him. Curses and continuous fault-finding were Grey's portion. She sometimes wondered if her irritating presence did her patient more harm than good. Yet strangers were insupportable to her. Her maids rarely stayed more than a month. Each left of her own accord, though it was Grey who bore the chief brunt of her sister's temper.

Cowering beneath the bed-clothes she hardly knew what to think. Blindly she had put herself into the hands of her God at the outset, attempting no locks, and trusting that some day His will would be made manifest. As yet, no sign of approval had been given to her ; but again, she had received no serious check, which she must take as evidence that she was on the right road. The rest would follow at an appointed time. She always liked to think after that it came then, for when she ventured to open her eyes they fell on a small luminous cross on a bracket over the writing-table. She

had bought it for a shilling at a bazaar years before, and it had stood there ever since, yet it seemed never to have shone so brightly as that night, when even the vivid lightning seemed dull by comparison.

Whether her fancy painted it so matters not, since it served to comfort a storm-tossed woman. She had for years looked in vain for a sign to help her on her way across the desert. Now it had come, and there was new life within her. She was ready for "the trotting of the ring" to begin afresh.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A rotten carcase of a boat, not rigged,
Nor tackle, sail nor mast; the very rats
Instinctively had quit her.

—SHAKESPEARE.

BEAUMONT recovered himself sufficiently to leave by the first train on the morrow. When Grey read his farewell note she learnt that he had slunk away without making any attempt to wake his wife. He was not given to the shirking of unpleasant duties as a rule. This was but another proof of the havoc which even occasional debauch may work amongst the principles of the most just. The knowledge that she would have to break the news to Firenze did not dismay her. Heavy weights seemed to rest so naturally on her shoulders that she would hardly have been surprised to find a deep groove in each of them for their safer accommodation. The interview with her sister was not to be anticipated without certain qualms, but some comfort lay in the thought that she could hardly outstrip former lengths of violence and abuse. She never stirred till noon. Grey stole in several times to see her, and marvelled at the peaceful sleeper with the sweet, childish expression which neither coarseness of feature nor a mottled complexion could quite obliterate. She had not the heart to rouse her. The only happy time she ever knew was in those long, dreamless spells of oblivion. Grey went out into the air. It was clear and bracing after the storm, but sinister clouds of impending trouble

pressed heavily upon her mind. The craving for instant motion was upon her. In the old days she would have started at once for the moors, but of late she had been afraid to wander far from the house, and instead began to pace the lawn until the heels of her shoes made ugly scars on the unused tennis-court. Backwards and forwards she rushed like a frozen sentinel. Later, Firenze's window was opened, and the maid leant out. Her mistress was just going into the Rose Room. She wished to be read to. Grey hastened indoors, went even to the length of fetching a French novel from the drawing-room on her way upstairs, yet she knew that it would not be wanted.

Firenze, muffled in a shawl, was sitting in her usual place on the hearth-rug watching the new-born fire moodily.

"I have been trying to read," she said plaintively, "but I can't see even this large print. I must go to an oculist."

"I will read to you. I have brought *Le Mariage de Chiffon*."

"In English?"

"No. You always say that 'Gyp' loses so much in translation."

"But I can't follow French any longer; it makes my head ache; and I used to know it so well that I could almost dream in French!"

"You forget how long it is since you left Paris. I will fetch another book out of Mudie's box."

"Yes; something light and modern with plenty of love in it. After all, it is the only thing that lasts, and is never really out of date. It always comes out fresh like a good sealskin."

"My idea of a sealskin is that it is more bother than it's worth. However valuable it is it wears out, and you

have to keep adding to it. Love is the same if you don't watch it against rust and moth."

"No, it isn't. Don't talk about what you don't understand. Once get a good thing and it's good to the end of time. Look at Ted, for instance. He never changes. He is to me like the Greenwich time, by which I regulate my life."

"You know he has gone away?"

"Yes, he has gone to shoot somewhere. He did not disturb me. It's the 'twelfth' this week, isn't it? Has he gone to the Spencers?"

"Oh, no! he has gone abroad to shoot big game. Don't you remember he told you yesterday he was thinking of going?"

"Yes, early yesterday morning; but then we went for a drive and he changed his mind."

"And after that?"

"After that? I don't remember anything about it." She pressed her hand to her forehead in an effort to concentrate her thoughts on what happened. Some suspicion of the truth must have come to her, for suddenly she uttered a cry of pain.

"Oh! he has left me as he said he would. Deny it if you can. Deny it! Deny it!"

Grey could not. She racked her brains for a suitable reply.

"You don't answer. You are an accomplice! How long will he be away?"

"I don't know."

"But you have an idea. Tell me. Will it be weeks, or months, or — oh! no."

"That depends entirely on you. One thing only I can tell you for certain, that nothing you can *say* will bring him back. No words of tenderness nor vows of reform, but only the fact that you have consented to go

away for a time. Then, and not till then, he would believe you were in earnest. Do it, dear. It is your one chance. Let us shut up the house and go at once."

She went to the bureau and took out a blue paper, filled a pen with ink, and put it between Firenze's fingers.

"Come, sign this. Let him see that you have real grit in you. Some women go so willingly to these homes; they look upon them as a haven of rest. He will think you all the pluckier, knowing that you dislike the idea so much. He would do as much for you. Prove that your love is no less than his."

Firenze flung the pen aside. The ink splashed on to the front of the loose white wrapper already bespattered with candle-grease.

"I will not sign it. He doesn't deserve it. He has left me, he who should have been the last to turn on me. Look at the heaps of women with really drunken husbands. Desertion on their part is almost unknown, and yet just because I give way now and then Ted must needs mount the high horse and ride away."

"He has only gone temporarily. He will come back the instant you are better."

"I am better now. As right as a trivet. See."

She walked round the room once with tottering steps. Grey pushed her into the nearest chair.

"Only a very insecure trivet at present, I'm afraid. Oh! Firenze, not only for Edward's sake, but for mine I implore you to do this thing. I am speaking now from purely selfish motives. Don't you see that the sooner you are better the sooner you and Edward will be left to yourselves and I free to go away? Has it never struck you that I am no longer a girl, but a woman of twenty-eight, and that there is just a chance that I too might marry? Sign this paper. This is the last time that I shall ever ask you to do it."

Firenze looked at the paper and seemed lost in thought. Her face brightened.

"What if I sign it to-morrow? I am feeling quite faint with the worry of the thing. I am fainting. Get me a drop of brandy."

"Here are strong salts."

She dashed the bottle out of Grey's hand.

"No, no! bring me brandy. Only a little just to take as a medicine. It won't hurt me."

Grey stood immovable. In a sudden fit of activity Firenze jumped up and rushed towards the door. Grey was only just in time to turn the key.

"Don't be childish. I must have something to drink or I shall go mad. My throat is on fire!"

"Water quenches fire; I will ring. Sit down quietly. You are quite feverish. There is a new bottle of smelling salts in the corner cupboard. I will fetch it."

She had forgotten the silver Eau de Cologne bottle on the table, but Firenze had not. She pulled out the stopper in a trice, and began to gulp down the contents.

"Uncommonly good brand this 4711!" she said triumphantly, and sank back into her chair.

Grey shut the cupboard, and went towards her empty-handed. She lay rolling her eyes from side to side, plucking at her gown nervously.

"Be quick with the other bottle, that one was nearly empty."

"You will get no more."

"Sha'n't I? Who's to prevent me? If I have to break the lock I'll have it."

"Hush! don't work yourself into a frenzy. What will the servants think?"

"The servants can't hear a sound in the basement. You know that as well as I do. Give me the key. It's

for the last time. Honour! honour! To-morrow I will sign your old paper."

"I'm not going to give it you, not if I stand here all night."

"Oh! Mouse, dear, a drop more can't hurt me. On the contrary, it will soothe me. I shall be in a beautiful sleep in five minutes if only you'll give it me."

"No, I'm not going to. Do you hear me? I'm not going to."

"*Aren't you?*"

With a spring Firenze threw herself upon her sister and had her by the throat. Grey caught hold of her wrists, but Firenze had always been the stronger and seemed suddenly endowed with superhuman power. A dire fight for life ensued, and the victim was sadly over-matched. She felt the cruel fingers fastening tighter round her neck, her eyes starting from their sockets and a gurgling in her throat which heralded suffocation. Life at any price seemed a glad thing then. She struggled with all her might for the mastery, digging her nails into her sister's hands until she felt warm blood upon them, lurching forward in abortive efforts to bite, trying to throw her adversary to the floor, but all with no avail. It was only when the key of the cupboard fell from her waistband that Firenze's hold on her loosened. She threw her aside, and pounced upon it with a cry of exultation. Grey rushed to the door, unlocked it and tore downstairs into the open air. Bare-headed, with dishevelled hair and bleeding hands she ran to the village. Dogs and children fled from her as she crossed the green. Only one or two idlers ventured to follow the poor distraught creature. No one recognised her. She was seen to push open the door of the doctor's house without ringing. Such unceremonious conduct must mean either death or a bad accident. Quite a crowd gathered in

front of the gate, but the doctor did not come out again that day. He and his wife took it in turns to watch in the spare room beside the bed-side of a delirious patient who had never undergone any serious ailment since her babyhood.

CHAPTER XXV.

I have kept the iron rule of womanly reserve
In lip and life till now.

—AURORA LEIGH.

THE friend to whom one can confidently wire for house-room in case of emergency is the one worth having. Dr. Hewitt having sternly forbidden Grey to return to Owlcliffe, she proposed herself to Mrs. Smythe, and received instructions to go down to Reading, where the whole family was staying with Septimus' youngest brother Octavius and his wife.

Two letters arrived for her just as she was leaving—one from her hostess:—

“ECLAIR HOUSE,
“READING.

“DEAR MISS ALISON,—We are delighted at the idea of making your acquaintance, and hope you will stay as long as possible. I don't know how the trains run, but suppose we may expect you about tea-time.—Yours sincerely,
HARRIET SMITH.”

The other was from Septimus:—

“MY DEAR GREY,—My good lady feels the heat so much that she has asked me to write. It is quite providential your coming just now, and I was on the point of asking you to pay us a visit. I want you to use your influence with Gladys. There is a Mr. Morgan here very sweet on her, as poor as a rat and so small. If you can

stop what could only be described as a 'Morgan-attic' marriage I shall be deeply grateful.—Yours ever,

"SEPTIMUS R-SMYTHE."

Grey felt like a dog at a fair as she stepped on to the Reading platform amongst the gay throng of holiday-makers. It was years since she had been in a crowd of any kind, and she was thankful to see Septimus in nautical blue serge and a white yachting-cap coming towards her twirling a Japanese umbrella. Gladys was close behind looking not a day older in spite of her thirty years and a succession of love affairs. She also wore blue serge with white shoes and the unnecessary reminder "H.M.S. Forget-me-not" in gilt lettering on her hat. She wore no gloves and carried a stick, but Grey saw something in her eyes that she had needed for many a long day, and which far out-shone the gaudiness of her attire.

Eclair House was a late-Victorian villa of white stucco, with cross-beams of chocolate-brown. A small lawn sloped down to the river at the back, but it was in the nucleus of a garden over-looked by every passer-by that the family was assembled.

Amelia, looking rather like a wax doll in a forcing-house, filled the small tent. A stout, clean-shaven man was reading on a seat under a small plane tree, and in the full glare of the evening sun a rotund little woman paced measuredly up and down with the dogged determination of one making up arrears on a pedometer.

"Here she is, Baby," said Septimus. "Hatty. Grey Alison, ahoy!"

The little fat man apparently answered to the name of "Baby." Grey wondered if his round face had earned it for him. She discovered afterwards that Septimus with his usual conservatism had never allowed it to fall

into disuse from the time that he had first taken his new-born brother on his knee. Grey went first into the tent, and stooping down to kiss Amelia apparently touched the spring which caused the wax doll to open her eyes. Then she turned to Octavius.

"I'm very glad to see you, Miss Alison. What a long journey you must have had. You will be ready for a good tea, or would you rather have an iced drink? 'Honey,' is tea coming?"

"In a minute. My dear child, aren't you nearly famished, or had you time for something at Paddington?"

"No; I only just caught the train."

"But you would lunch at York, I suppose. A fine station and an excellent refreshment-room. 'Honey,' you remember when we came back from Scotland, four years ago, what a capital dinner we had?"

"Oh, yes! of course I remember; and we ended by staying the night to see the chocolate factory."

"And the Minster?" asked Grey.

"Oh, yes! if I recollect correctly we passed the Minster on the way."

"You are looking very thin, Grey," said Amelia.

"I have not been very well lately. That is why I have come to sponge on you."

"Don't put it like that. You know that we have never seen enough of you all these years."

"There are sponges and sponges," said Octavius. "Liken yourself to a nice lemon sponge, and we will not contradict you. There are few better things."

"Now I will show you your room," said Mrs. Smith, after she and her husband had pressed half-a-dozen kinds of cake and sandwiches on her.

"I will show her the way, Aunt Hatty, if you and Uncle Occy want to go for your walk."

BALLAST

"Will you, Gladys? that would be kind. Mr. Smith and I always walk about this time, rain or shine. It gives us such an appetite for dinner."

Gladys put her arm through Grey's and led her away.

"I am so glad you have come. I want you to tranquillise the pater. There's a man down here—Jim Morgan—such a nice chap, but, unfortunately, short. You know father. He judges all men by a guardsman standard, and anything under is disqualified."

"Do you care for him, or is it only —?"

"I'm just 'nuts' on him. It's the real thing this time. Oh! help me. You know about these things. I'm not a child, and I've never had the slightest wish to marry till now. I've been far too happy and comfortable at home."

"Could he make you comfortable? Is he well off?"

"Not very. He's in the biscuit trade here, but I've come to the conclusion that there's something better in life than fine clothes and good living. A surfeit of silk foundations and puff paste doesn't bring real happiness."

"No, of course not."

"And you'll help me? Father thinks so much of what you think."

"If this man is in any way worthy of you I'll plead for him as if he were my own."

"Worthy of me! Why, I'm not half good enough for him. Look, isn't it a fine face?"

She pulled a plush case out of her pocket, and showed Grey the photograph of a common-place young man in dress clothes.

"He looks clever," looking at the aggressive forehead on which she could almost see the soap shining. "It is a good face, too. Has he asked you to marry him?"

"Oh! yes. It was not easy to manage in this family. We always go out in a steam launch. Isn't it wicked, with a beautiful Canadian and a punt eating their heads off? But one night he came round and asked me to lend him a bicycle lamp. It's light till nearly bed-time now, but nobody noticed. It happened in the boat-house. Now I will help you to unpack. This is your room. It's over the kitchen. Aunt Hatty has a theory that the smell of cooking whets one's hunger. You are looking dreadfully ill and drawn, dear. I'm sure there's something the matter. Tell me. I might be able to set things right. Is it Mr. Howard?"

"I have neither seen nor heard of Mr. Howard for nine years. I think he is abroad."

"Oh, no! he isn't. He's in London. Pater saw him last week. He said he looked over-worked. He asked him to come down here."

"Oh! not while I am here, please, please, don't let him." Then more calmly. "I should have to talk to him, you see, knowing him pretty well, and I do so want a complete rest."

"All right. He sha'n't be asked if I have anything to do with it. Now I must fly."

In the drawing-room Grey found Hereward looking a schoolboy still at thirty-one. The moustache looked an anachronism on so young a face, and might have been stuck on in a sudden desire to ape a grown man.

He stared quite blankly at Grey as she went up to him.

"We almost require an introduction, don't we, Herry?"

He had not outgrown a youthful *gaucherie*.

"Is it really you, Grey? I heard that you were coming, but I should hardly have known you—you have forgotten our compact and let yourself worry. Now look

BALLAST

at me, who have the cares of a house and wife and child on my shoulders, and not too much to keep them on. Can you see one wrinkle?"

"You are an exception. You are the youngest looking thing I ever saw. I don't know how you do it."

"I don't. It's done for me. It's the atmosphere I've lived in all my life. Had ever a fellow such parents and such a sister? Sylvia's the same. You can't inhale pure love and not benefit by it. When I go to and from my work by the 'Underground' and the hot vapour gets into my lungs, I often think that it's like many a poor devil's home life."

"I am so glad you are so happy. Is Sylvia here?"

"No; she wouldn't leave that blessed boy! I have only come to see the governor on business." He handed her a photograph of himself sitting down with the baby, and a little dark woman leaning on his shoulder.

"And that's a new one of Gladys. How do you think she is looking?"

"Rather out of spirits."

"Yes, she is. I expect she has told you about Morgan. If not, she will do. Nothing's private in our family —"

"She has told me. If you think him good enough for her I mean to see her through."

"He's a real good chap. Father doesn't cotton to him because he's on the small side, but I keep feeding him up with all the information I can find about short men. Nelson and Napoleon and Lord Roberts are served up as *hors-d'œuvre* to all our confabs."

"And what does Cousin Amelia think?"

"Oh! she's a bit sick that he's not a soldier, and Father says, 'Why, he could never have got into the army, he's so terribly under-sized.'"

No great conversational effort was required at dinner.

Octavius talked to Grey between the courses, but seemed unable to spare her much attention at any other time.

"Do you know the river well?" he found time to ask between the spoonfuls of an elusive jelly.

"Not very well. I have sometimes run down on a Sunday from Town. The little I have seen struck me as being very beautiful."

"The scenery on the Thames is, in my opinion, the most beautiful in Europe; and such excellent hotels have sprung up of late that there is no such thing as roughing it if you know the ropes. It is possible in many places to get quite a good *table d'hôte* dinner. My wife and I have sometimes been abroad for our summer holiday, but, with one or two exceptions, have been wofully disappointed."

"Yes; indeed. I never wish to go again except to Paris. They certainly can give you decent food there. But do you remember Venice, Occy?"

"The parboiled macaroni?"

"No, that was Naples."

"Oh, yes; Venice was the oil salads and the over-ripe plums."

"And Florence?"

"Oh! I should love to see Florence almost more than any place," said Grey.

"We have odious recollections of it. We twice found slugs in the lettuce. No; take my advice, England is best."

At breakfast, the next morning, the day's plans were discussed.

"Miss Alison would like to go on the river at once, I am sure," said Octavius. "We might all go down to Sonning in the launch, and be back in time for lunch, eh! 'Honey'?"

"I thought that she might like to see over the bis-

BALLAST

cuit factory. That nice Mr. Morgan has given me an order. She can go on the river any day. You would enjoy watching the biscuits being made, and they give you quite a quantity to taste. We might do the biscuits this morning, and go on the river this afternoon and take tea."

Grey caught an appealing look from Gladys and voted for the biscuits.

"Very well, then, that's settled."

"And you shall come out with me in the skiff this morning, Baby, and I'll guarantee you shall be as hungry as a hunter when you come in."

And so in the full glare of the scorching sun Grey found herself dogging her hostess's footsteps, basket on arm, peering into ovens and boiling cauldrons, feigning interest in the pedigree of cracknels and the evolution of ginger nuts; whilst Gladys and her lover cooed to one another under cover of the deafening machinery. Opportunity to probe Mrs. Smith as to her opinion of Mr. Morgan was not long in coming. Most of the dainties which fell to Grey's share she consigned to her basket. When they found a seat on some tins she was able to hand over to her a tempting assortment.

"How nice Mr. Morgan seems. Could you not arrange a match between him and Gladys, Mrs. Smith?"

"My dear, that is just what I am trying to do. Septimus is against it, but I am sure that the poor girl is in love with him. She doesn't eat enough to keep a fly, and he's not much better. He came to dine the other night, and actually passed the marrow toast. It's narrow-minded of her father, I think, to object to him on such foolish grounds as size. I told him only yesterday that the *chef* at our hotel in Paris was the shortest man I ever saw, and such a true artist must have had a soul above the average."

"Oh! I don't think that he would be so petty as to doubt his mental worth on such a score. Cousin Septimus is never small, but I think he would like to see Gladys married to a big man who looked as if he would protect her."

"But that is absurd. Footpads and highwaymen are extinct. A woman may go anywhere unmolested nowadays. I have several times gone into strange restaurants in the Strand to sample their steaks, and have never met with the slightest unpleasantness."

Grey's glance at the 'walls of flesh' was anything but sceptical.

"Then we must all conspire against Cousin Septimus, and I, for one, intend to begin at once."

She was as good as her word. It was Saturday and a holiday. Mr. Morgan returned to luncheon on Mrs. Smith's invitation. To ask him to a meal was the best she could do for him.

The launch was moored outside the dining-room window. Grey discovered that the smell of the engines made her feel ill. Mr. Morgan offered to pull her and Gladys down to Sonning in the skiff. After that Grey evinced a sudden desire to learn punting, having first carefully ascertained that neither Septimus nor his baby-brother knew anything of the art. In a secluded part of the back-water near "the Fisheries" Mr. Morgan gave her lessons every evening; she, for the most part, lying half-asleep at one end while Gladys and the skipper sat at the other. She did not purposely listen to what they said, but even whispers may be heard on the river, and many examples of the "tautology of love" reached her. She did not think them tedious. Neither did she wonder after the shock of the first meeting with the suburban Romeo that poor Gladys should have suffered many sleepless nights on account of him. Since her

imagination had endowed him with a halo and wings it mattered little what he was in reality. There were one or two days when a rampant conscience was quieted by a *bond fide* lesson, and Grey came to know her master better; later, one when she got such trifles as the cut of his clothes and his obnoxious black curls, and was able to tell him sincerely that she approved her cousin's choice. She meant every word she said, for she knew herself to be hypercritical in such matters as appearance and manner, and, after all, Gladys would be marrying the sort of man with which she had mixed all her life. To go outside her sphere one way or another puts happiness out of a woman's reach.

Grey was comparatively content these days. The home news was reassuring. Dr. Hewitt wrote in high praise of Firenze's nurse, and she herself was wonderfully docile and pleased with the change.

It seemed to be Grey's lot to be thrown amongst people who devoted their lives to the "over-great care of the carcase." The Smiths ate to excess, and looked forward to feeding-time like so many beasts; but she liked them. Their standard of the responsibilities of life was not high, but they lived in unison shedding rays of happiness on all around them.

One afternoon, at tea-time, the engagement was formally announced. A family conclave followed on the lawn for every errand-boy to hear. Kissing and speechifying followed, and by the time that the young couple escaped down to the river quite a crowd had gathered at the gate. Another week passed. All went smoothly, yet Septimus had undoubtedly something on his mind. He was bursting with some secret, and longing to proclaim it from the house-tops. The question which exercised him always on such occasions was not so much who might be trusted with it as who might not. Grey could see

that every one in the house knew except herself, and was vaguely beginning to fear its nature when diversion came in the form of a summons to Town.

Dr. Hewitt wrote that Firenze had quarrelled with the nurse, who had left at a moment's notice, and she announced her intention of going to see a London specialist for her dyspepsia. "There is nothing that the first man in the land can do for her relief if she will not help herself," he wrote, "but at any rate by the time that you get this we shall have arrived at our destination, and very reluctantly I'm afraid I must ask you to curtail your visit and bring her home again on Thursday."

A chorus of disapproval greeted her announcement of instant departure. Septimus was in despair.

"You can't go till Monday, I won't allow it. I have a particular reason for wishing you to stop over the week-end."

He tapped his breast-pocket significantly, and could hardly restrain himself from producing the letter which he had written to Howard over-night.

"No, Grey, Pater is quite right. You must stay for the Town Regatta."

"Yes, please, Miss Grey. I was in hopes you were going to 'cox' our boat. We want something fetching in the stern."

"Oh! my dear, you cannot miss the Regatta. It would be positively cruel. We are having a marquee, and Gunter is doing the ices."

"I must go," she said firmly. "You don't know how sorry I am, but please don't make it harder for me."

When Septimus realised that she was bent on going he went dejectedly to the "den," and, determined not to be daunted, tore up the letter and wrote another off his own bat. In its new form recourse to the A.B.C. was necessary, an unexpected complication; but at the

end of an hour he had mastered the departures of the two Scotch expresses from King's Cross, and felt that he had done great work for his cause. Every one went to the station to bid Grey good-bye; Octavius and his Honey both laden with cake and fruit to ward off starvation on the journey.

"We've never had such a nice guest," said Hatty; "whenever you want a change just you wire and say you're coming, and we'll kill the fatted calf or whatever animal happens to be in season."

"I will, indeed; and mind if your sight-seeing ever brings you our way you must let me know, and I will show you the perfection of a girdle-cake."

They drew in their breath audibly at the very thought. When the train steamed away their mouths were still watering.

Dr. Hewitt had taken rooms for the sisters at the Grand Hotel. When Grey arrived, shortly after noon, she found him and Firenze in the hall on the point of starting for Harley Street. Firenze's face brightened when she saw Grey. She kissed her affectionately. The incident of a few weeks before she had as completely forgotten as if it had never taken place.

"Well, Mouse, have you enjoyed yourself? You are quite sunburnt."

"Yes; they were all so good to me."

"Of course. Why shouldn't they be? Isn't everybody always good to you? Well, I've had a poor time. I can't eat anything without suffering agonies. If this man can't cure me I don't know what I shall do."

"You must promise me to do as he tells you, Mrs. Beaumont. He won't stand any nonsense, you know."

The three got into a four-wheeler. Firenze lay back, evidently in great pain. She clung to Grey at every

crowded crossing. Tears of fear and weakness ran down her purple cheeks when a heavy dray swung round a corner and almost collided with the cab. Yet by the time that they were shown into the waiting-room, full of patients, she had assumed such fascination of manner as still remained to her. She tripped into the presence of the great man armed *cap-à-pié* with devices to bamboozle him—a sad sight, like an old *prima donna* prancing through “Carmen.”

“I have come to you because you are the one man in whom I have any faith. Nobody else has done me any good; and oh! how I suffer!”

She turned up her blood-shot eyes and looked pathetic.

“Will you kindly take off your hat, madam?”

She frowned at having to remove the becoming hat and opaque veil, then sighed with charming resignation as she complied.

“Are there no entertainments in your horrid London where we poor women may keep our heads covered?”

He placed her in a chair near the window, and looked at her for a few seconds.

“Plain food, early hours, fresh air; that’s all I can do for you.”

“I don’t think you understand that even a milk-pudding sits on my chest like a cannon-ball. I could not live on much simpler fare.”

“What do you drink?”

“A little claret at dinner. Sometimes a drop of brandy at bed-time.”

“Make the ‘little’ less. Who is your medical adviser?”

“A Dr. Hewitt. He’s only an old country surgeon. He has done me no good.”

“What did he tell you?”

"Oh! much the same as you have."

"He perhaps put it a little stronger and told you that you were drinking yourself to death."

She turned pale.

"We doctors can't afford to mince matters. There is nothing that any of us can do for you if you won't change your mode of living. What you want, my dear madam, is a new boiler. The old one is burnt out, literally burnt out. The best that I can do is to patch it up for you, but that can't be done while it's still hot, you know. Knock off spirits, try water, and be content with a glass of claret once a day."

"And you think that then I should get better?"

"I hope so; but it's only fair to tell you that the danger signal is up. Come, dear lady, think of your looks."

"I was pretty once. I was rather afraid lately that I had gone off terribly, but, of course, we can't see ourselves as others see us. Tell me frankly, Dr. Wood, am I still beautiful?"

Dr. Wood had had many a sad truth to break to dying women, so many that he fancied that he was becoming quite callous; but there was something so childish and appealing in the terrible wreck before him that he ventured on a professional lie.

"If I had not thought you beautiful," he said gallantly, "I should hardly have thought it worth while to mention your appearance."

She was satisfied.

"Oh! I will try. You have made me feel quite strong. I wish that there were more men like you."

She pressed his hand. He touched the bell. Outside the door Dr. Hewitt stood. She was in a corner.

"Oh! this is Dr. Hewitt. Perhaps he would like a word with you."

"I will not keep you a minute, sir. What you have to tell me will not take long, I fancy."

"No. I give her six months at the outside. It is a sad case. She must have been a pretty woman once."

Firenze joined Grey in high spirits. Dr. Wood was a charming man, quite a courtier, so different from "old Hewitt," with an accent one could hang a hat on.

They spent the rest of the day shopping. In moments of good and evil fortune alike it makes equal demands on a woman's time. She is about to marry, and gives as much attention to her *trousseau* as to her lover. She loses all that she holds most dear, and her first visit is to the dressmaker.

Early next morning Grey went out to a Registry Office, leaving Firenze in bed. They were to leave King's Cross directly after luncheon. She returned in good time to the hotel. Firenze was partly dressed and lying on the sofa. One glance was enough to tell her what had happened in her absence, but she was not incapable, understanding all that was said to her, and expressed a strong wish to be taken home, so no change was made in the arrangements.

King's Cross was a bewildering mass of men, women and tourists, which are a distinct class. Agitated females accosted strange men, mistaking them for the station-master. Whole families placed themselves resignedly into the hands of bewildered porters, blindly trusting that empty compartments would be found for them in the already over-crowded train. Troops of disappointed passengers paraded the platform. On all sides was heard the question, "Are you the guard of this train?" The whereabouts of the lost tribes seemed more probable to Grey than it had ever been before as she stood watching them. Dr. Hewitt had gone in search of their engaged carriage. Firenze sat on a seat behind

the luggage-barrow. Time was getting on, and Grey must take the tickets. She slipped away to the booking-office without saying anything to Firenze, but when she came back she had disappeared. She blamed herself strongly for having left her. She had seemed so stupefied the last hour or two that she had imagined her to be only half-conscious, but she knew too well now where she would find her. The refreshment-room was full. A crowd, composed chiefly of commercial travellers, stood at the counter, and Grey saw to her relief that Firenze had only just reached it. When the attendant placed a glass of port before her, Grey, by means of much jostling, had elbowed her way to her sister's side. Mixed drinks, she knew, would have fatal results. The brandy was only just taking effect. She foresaw a scene at York station. Just as Firenze was about to lift the glass to her lips Grey put out her hand and took it from her. "Thanks, so much; that's just what I want," and before Firenze had recovered from her astonishment she had drunk the contents. She touched her sister on the arm and turned to go, and in the doorway, towering above every one else, saw Howard staring reproachfully at her. Each stood immovable looking at the other for a short space, then Howard hurried away. Grey rushed after him. Whatever might be the cost to herself and others she could keep silence no longer. She would explain all. In the face of such damning evidence no man on earth would believe her innocent unless she went to him and told him everything from the beginning. It was doubtful if he had even recognised Firenze. No one would who had known her in her prime. The bell rang for the train to start. Grey did not heed it, but as quickly as the seething crowd would permit pursued the tall figure along the platform. When she came to a little clear space she ran. She was gain-

ing on him. In another minute with luck she would be within ear-shot. And then a couple of shooting-dogs came in her way and wound themselves tightly round her. She believed afterwards that she doubled her fists and hit them hard, but she could grasp nothing at the time beyond the fact that Howard had disappeared. An official extricated her from the hampering chains. Dr. Hewitt rushed up and half lifted her into the moving train, and during the entire journey she sat in a dazed condition looking out of the window, but seeing nothing nor nobody.

CHAPTER XXVI.

So many of us have noble ideals, and then because we cannot see them realised immediately, we accept in a moment of petulance the lesser thing. There is a king's daughter for each one of us. Let us wed her or none other. And so with every hope and aim in life. We should do, say, content ourselves with nothing which seems to fall below the highest we can think of. To choose the false is mere impatience with our quest of the true. This is what really degrades us, really causes despair.

—JOHN OLIVER HOBBS.

So surely as each fresh trouble came upon Grey was it regularly followed by some blessing. It might not be great, but it never failed to appear, always keeping a respectful distance behind its unwelcome forerunner as if in fear of discovery. Long force of habit had taught her to look upon them as visible landmarks on a dreary waste. They did more to strengthen her faith than any evidences of religion through the agency of eminent Churchmen. So real had the divine law of compensation become to her that even though its fulfilment was sometimes sadly over-due she never quite lost hope, and took heart from the thought that when it did come it might be double the usual size.

Things were so bad on her return home that no power in Heaven or earth could have made them worse. Firenze was prostrate after the two days in London; her new maid threw up the situation at the last minute, the fine weather broke, and above all such minor worries she was haunted by the knowledge that Howard must

at last be dead to her. Up to then she had often been pleased to fancy that there was some invisible thread of communication between them. Now she felt herself cut adrift from the disappearing wreck of old association, without so much as a broken spar to cling to. The sudden impulse to tell him all had vanished. It would have meant a wilful breaking of the promise which she had made it her life's work to keep whole. She loathed to think that frustration had come, not from any sudden virtue on her part, but by the trivial circumstance of the shooting dogs. She wondered if by chance they had been thrown in her way to save her. Even then she could not exonerate her conduct. The man who thinks murder can never be guiltless to his conscience.

For close upon a week she went down to the lowest depths of despair that it is possible for human soul to sound. Then she felt her reasoning power return to her and told herself that it was against nature that it could last. So she was not surprised when before long a wire came from Fitz announcing that he had landed from India and was coming to Owlcliffe at once.

Grey went to the station to meet him. He would ask questions best answered before he met his sister-in-law. It was a very lanky, attenuated Fitz that stepped slowly out of the train in a thick overcoat, though the month was only September, and leaning on a stick.

"I'm so glad to see you, Fitz, but have you been ill?"

"Yes; typhoid. It was touch and go for three weeks. Didn't Ted tell you?"

"No; he is away. We knew nothing till your telegram came."

"And the bride? Is she at home? She will always be the bride to me. How beautiful she looked at the wedding."

"I can just remember. It was not yesterday, and you

BALLAST

must not expect to find her quite as young as she was. She is much stouter, for one thing."

"No, by Jove! it must be ten years ago if it's a day, but everything looks just the same. You seem to have slept all the time, like the Princess in the fairy tale."

"I? I am quite different and old. Everybody says so."

"You look exactly the same to me. Why, there is Samuels. Hallo! Samuels, I needn't ask how you are. You look as fit as a four-year-old."

"Can't say the same for you, sir."

"No; I'm a bit tucked up, but this air will soon set me up. How are the hounds?"

"I don't exactly know, sir. We 'aven't got them now."

"I think you'd better get in, Fitz, it's rather cold." He obeyed without demur, and seemed glad to lean back against the cushions.

"I've brought heaps of luggage. I haven't come on a 'dine and sleep' visit this time."

"That's right. We want some one to wake us up badly."

"Just wait till I'm a bit stronger, then, and your life shall be one long *reveille*. I'm afraid I can't sit on a horse yet, I'm as weak as a cat still, but with luck by November we may get out. Why has that idiot brother of mine given up the hounds? Is he still tied to his lady's apron-strings?"

"Oh! dear, no. Another man was very keen to have them and Edward wanted to go abroad and shoot elk or something. He's somewhere in South America."

"Well, I suppose he won't object to my riding his hunters. We'll make things hum, you and I. We had some fairly good riders at 'Ooty,' but not one of them could touch you. Give me a quiet cob and promise to

pilot me and I don't see why I shouldn't go out in a week or two."

Grey's lip quivered. She lowered her eyes.

"I haven't been on a horse for ages. My nerve seems to have gone all to pieces, but, perhaps, it may come back."

He patted her hand caressingly.

"Poor little girl! Of course it will. Then it must be the other way about. I must take care of you for a change."

"Yes, please."

"You're a bit down on your luck, old girl, aren't you? There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"I'm a bit run down, that's all. It's a big house for two lone women, and we're neither of us very lively."

"I can't imagine Firenze as a grass widow. How does she like it?"

"Not much; and she suffers terribly from dyspepsia, so don't chaff her, she can't stand it."

Both were silent after that until they reached the house. Grey, in her corner, wondered if she should have told him the truth. He stood in the light of a big brother to her, and had a right to know the family's private affairs. Loyalty had stayed her tongue, and the thought that, as he had not noticed the marked change in her, there was the chance that he might see Firenze through rose-coloured glasses also. To disillusion Fitz unnecessarily she could not bring herself. After nine years in India amongst all classes of women his most distinctive trait was still to believe the best of every fellow-creature.

He, for his part, felt that all was not going well with his brother. A temporary misunderstanding with his wife, it might be, which would only serve to make reconciliation sweeter.

But the moment that his eyes rested on his sister-in-

law's face he saw the truth. An Eastern life had not taught him much of vice. Some men are blest with a moral bump of locality and cannot go wrong if they try, but he had learnt to recognise it in others and the dipsomaniac had been a common sight thrust upon his notice at every turn.

Firenze, as usual, went to bed soon after dinner. Grey gave orders to the invalid to follow suit, but he pleaded for one cigarette in the Rose Room for old time's sake.

"Well, then, just one; and then I shall hand you over to Enderby, but you are not to talk."

"No, I won't; but there's just one thing that I must say. I know about Firenze."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody. Doesn't such a loathsome-looking object speak for itself? The Bride! Good Heavens! It's enough to send poor old Ted headlong to the dogs."

"And he has been so good; until this summer he never left her. I'm glad he went. If he had stayed she would have ended by dragging him down with her."

"And you? How on earth have you stood it? No wonder all the kick has gone out of you."

"I don't know. I don't think that I could have stood it much longer if you hadn't come. Oh! you can't think what a relief it is to be able to speak of it to some one at last."

"But surely everybody must see?"

"I don't know. They must have a good idea, I suppose; but I have never mentioned it to a soul except, of course, to the doctor, and some of the older servants."

"Not even to your best friend? I thought that no woman could keep a secret."

"A woman never knows what she can do till she tries. Now, I am not going to say another word. If I once

began to talk I should go on for hours. Don't change your plans now that you know this. It will be a sad visit for you, but I have so longed for a companion and now that you have come I can't let you go just yet."

"I go when you tell me and not before."

All through the winter he stayed, and she had not the strength to send him away. He had grown very dear, almost necessary, to her, this thirty-year-old boy whom she had nursed back to health. Once he was strong again she allowed him to do much for her to which, in the past, her independence would never have submitted. Under his tender guidance she rode again, and all times when off duty he made her spend in the open air with him either tramping over the farms or carrying his game-bag and the ferrets. He did not mind much what they did so long as they were together, and took much credit to himself when he saw the roses bloom once more in her cheeks. Firenze's moods were fluctuating. For the most part she slept half the day, but at times the lethargy would change to raving. Constant supervision was now, by the doctor's orders, somewhat relaxed. A bottle more or less could not hurt her now, and so Grey's tether was lengthened. There were ugly days still of which she made light. Days spent alone with her sister, when she knew that she carried her life in her hand. Once she had to call to Fitz to hold the maniac down, and the knowledge that he was at hand if wanted strengthened her endurance four-fold.

One day in February, when they were gathering violets, he asked her to marry him. She had feared that it must come sooner or later, and had done her utmost to ward off the evil hour, not only for his sake, but for her own. That such a thing as temptation should ever have gained a momentary hearing as touching her affec-

tion for another man she could not have believed possible. Women she divided into three kinds. Those who will marry any man for this world's goods and so-called independence; them she classed lower than the fallen, for it is starvation that so often breeds degradation, while for those others in her own station of life there was no excuse. Then there were the women who cannot have the man they love, and make up their minds to be content with a second choice. They might be envied. And lastly, there were a very few who will marry the one man or none at all. Under this heading she had put herself. There could never be any question of her caring for any one else. Howard's belief in her had been shaken, but he was as much to her then as he had been ten years before. Still, she was too practical by nature not to face facts.

Firenze was dying, Edward's whereabouts unknown, and when her freedom came she could see no chance of clearing herself in Howard's eyes. He had not married, but it was impossible to believe that he had remained faithful to the memory of her better self for so long. And Fitz would take her abroad to start life afresh in a new world, far from any reminder of the past. There was much that was sound in what he said.

"We are about the same age, we have the same tastes, we know each other's faults, above all we are good companions. Apart from any other feeling I have learnt to look upon you as I would on a favourite brother-officer. There is no one whose advice I would so readily take upon any subject as yours. And, above all, I love you, Grey. I have loved you from the first. You have always been and always will be the best influence of my life. Be my wife, dear. I will wait as long as you wish, only tell me that some day you will marry me."

She shook her head.

"I can't, Fitz. I'm too fond of you to marry you. There's some one else."

"And you are to marry him?"

"No. He went out of my life long ago, but you know that one can love the dead as well as the living. You don't wish to marry me now, do you?"

He took a turn down the path. She sat on the edge of the frame and absently gathered a few violets. He was soon at her side again.

"It makes no difference, darling. It was like your pluck to tell me about him. After all, we are never likely to meet him in India, I suppose; and besides, I would trust you anywhere. So you will say 'yes'?"

"No, no! I think not. I am almost certain not. You must give me till to-morrow to consider, but I can't give you one atom of hope that my answer will be different. All I can say is that I will not decide in a hurry."

"I believe it will be as I wish, I do indeed. Some writer says, 'Every one can have what he wants if he only wants it hard enough.'"

"Yes, dear, but you see that I may be wanting my 'something' just as hard."

She turned in the direction of the house.

"Give me those violets, Grey. If your answer should be 'no' they will remind me of the noblest woman I have ever known; and if it should be 'yes' they will mark the turning-point in my life and the first glimpse of Heaven."

All through the night Grey communed with herself. From the first she knew more or less what the outcome would be. It was only the terrible sense of loneliness which had protracted the struggle so long. She met him on the morrow with downcast eyes.

"I can't do it, Fitz. I want to marry you, I do love you in a way, but I can't bring myself to do it, I can't. It would be best for me, I know. For if I once gave myself to you I would go through with the thing thoroughly, and in trying to make you happy a great degree of happiness might be mine; but I must think of him. My theory of the true love is the daily questioning of one's self, 'What good, great or little, can I do him?' It may be that he may never want me again, it seems almost a certainty, but supposing he ever needed my help in ever so slight a matter and I were tied to another man. He might find no difficulty in treating me as an old platonic friend, and I might also be able to school myself into apparent indifference rather than refuse to help him, but I am not sure. You said last night that we should not be likely to meet *him* in India. It would not be probable, but possible. He rushes all over the world, and then we should come home sometimes. You said, too, that you could trust me, but if I met him face to face, if the same room held us both, I am not certain that I could trust myself. I have tried to be a good woman, God alone knows how hard! I have trampled my love for this man under my feet and seen it rise once more and trampled it down again, but it's of no use. Fitz, suppose that I married you, and then came across him and learnt by chance that he still cared, what would happen?"

"Nothing, I hope."

"So do I; but as long as there is a doubt I am not fit to be your wife. You love me. I know that you do. Think then what it would mean to me if ever the time arrived when he came to fetch me and I could not go. It is not likely, there never was anything more unlikely in this world, but I have set my whole life on this

one chance and I would die alone and friendless rather than miss it if it came."

"And I have missed a love like this."

"Don't regret it. I don't know that it's the sort that brings happiness. Some people might call it a form of madness, *l'idée fixe*, but it happens to be my reading of what love should be, and we can but try to be true to the best of ourselves. There are heaps of women who would make you a great deal happier than I ever could. Don't take this too much to heart. Propinquity is answerable for a good deal of the mischief. If any other girl had come upon the scene when I did it would have been just the same."

"No, I can't quite think that; but I give you my word of honour to try and face the thing. Your future will be black enough without my helping to make it worse."

"And you will go away?"

"I think I must if you can bear to be left. If not, of course, I will stay by you until—as long as you want me."

"No, I would rather you went; but, oh! I shall miss you."

"I think I'd like to go to-day, dear, by the next train."

"I will arrange it."

"And we shall say good-bye now?"

She held out her hand. He pressed it to his lips.

"Good-bye, darling, good-bye! and remember, if, after all, it should come right, that there will be two happy men thinking of you on that day, though in different ways."

She could not speak for the great, aching lump rising in her throat. She looked at him in silence and he at her, but neither saw the other for blinding tears.

Grey's whole attention during the following weeks was given to the search for Beaumont's address. She and Dr. Hewitt left no stone unturned to trace him, but the task seemed hopeless from the first. Even his bankers could give no clue. In his occasional letters he spoke of a vagabond life, but promised to send his address as soon as he settled anywhere. By each mail Grey looked eagerly for news, but March gave place to April and April was nearly gone and still he did not so much as write. Firenze was gradually growing weaker. There was no immediate cause for alarm. She suffered little now, and slept almost continuously, a sign that the end was not far off. She seldom spoke. Even her husband's name was uttered only in delirium. It was months since she had seen him, and her memory was gone.

Grey began to think of the welfare of Firenze's soul, and wondered if she should be gently told to prepare in some way for death, but the doctor advised not. She seemed utterly unconscious of her state, and no divine instinct drew her nearer to her God than at any other time. She was no gentler than she had ever been, no word of repentance fell from her lips. It would have made some small amends to Grey if she had confessed the slander which had helped to wreck her sister's life. It was true that the poor creature had no idea of the mischief done, but she knew at any rate that she had told a deliberate lie.

All that Grey could do for her was to lengthen the Bible reading each day and shorten the fiction. Ever since her eyesight had failed, Firenze had depended entirely on Grey to satisfy her insatiable hunger for love-stories. Almost the last wish she expressed was for a favourite scene from "Joan."

There was no visible change in her till just before the last, when she rushed down to the pantry one morn-

ing in her night-dress and screamed the house down for brandy. By some means she got it. That was the last flicker before the flame went out. That night, feeling strangely nervous, Grey opened the shutters, and spent the long hours looking out across the moat. She dared not open the window, Firenze was so susceptible to cold. Only the gurgling, bestial snore from the bed broke the silence, but Grey was glad even of that, for it spoke of life, and she fancied that there was death in the air.

Next morning came for Grey the expected letter from Beaumont. He gave an address at Rio, and asked her to cable news of his wife in their private code. "Come," in English, was all that she could say. As she rang for Enderby to order a groom he rushed into the breakfast-room in his shirt-sleeves. His sparse, white hair stood on end. His mouth quivered, he tried in vain to articulate a word. Grey made no attempt to understand him. She knew but too well what he had come to say.

CHAPTER XXVII.

He made one day an alms house of his heart, which ever since is loose upon the latch for those who pull the string.

—AURORA LEIGH.

All I can say is I saw it.

—BROWNING.

ON receiving the clumsily constructed letter from Septimus Smythe Howard hardly knew what to think. No names were mentioned, but in his efforts to prove mysterious Septimus had only succeeded in accentuating the fact that Grey would be found on King's Cross platform sooner or later on the day specified. That Septimus had his interest at heart he never doubted, and there was something in what he said that kindled new hope in his heart and sent him post-haste to the great terminus directly after breakfast. She was better. After many cruel reverses the little slip of a girl had unaided laid the giant low. He remembered how she had refused his help, even going to the length of denying point-blank the smallest grounds for his accusation. Subsequent study of dipsomania had, however, made him lenient on the score of untruthfulness. He had known all along that she was capable of victory if any woman were. He wished only that it might have been his privilege to stand by her throughout the campaign. It had been a nine years' war, and he could not help thinking that in the event of alliance less precious time might have been wasted.

Then he put useless repining out of his heart, and

read the letter again and again on his way to the station. Each time its meaning became more lucid. Grey was evidently staying with the Smythes, and wished to see him on her way home. It was hardly likely that she would write herself, remembering the nature of their last meeting. Having assured himself that she was not in the ten o'clock express he went back to his rooms. He had left Victoria Street and taken a flat in Jermyn street sufficiently old to be haunted by a diversity of other men's ghosts, but free from any disturbing apparition of his latter-day experience. He had not nursed his trouble. There had been no maudlin keeping of anniversaries nor deliberate grovelling in the dusty lumber of the past. He had never held with those who must always be refreshing green memories with unnecessary reference to the ledgers of prosperity, nor yet with those who, after some near bereavement, will have the very room of the dead left as in life. Real grief he knew to be poignant enough in its barest form without dressing it up in useless sentimentalities. He did not go near the Foreign Office that morning. His clerks received word not to expect him till the afternoon, and he wondered if he should be there even then or journeying north on a matter more urgent than any affair of State.

The Euston Road was partly up as he drove to the Great Northern the second time, and for some minutes his hansom was wedged in the midst of the congested traffic, unable to move either way. It was after two when he rushed into the station, the same moment when Grey missed her sister. The first thing that he saw was a dress-basket with Grey's initials painted on the ends in white, then just ahead he caught sight of her walking along the platform. He followed. She turned into the refreshment-room. The door was still vibrat-

ing as he reached it. Even then he never suspected anything. He never did when once he was with her. Even that glimpse of the neat grey flannel back and the dark coils of hair had made him forget everything except the maddening fact that she was wasting time in buying buns when she might have been talking to him. He pushed open the door and went in. He was the tallest man present, and from where he stood could see her perfectly. He hurried forward. She was likely to be kept waiting some time. The ogling barmaid was not likely to listen to the modest demand of a lady with so many of the more interesting sex needing attention. Suddenly he stood still. Grey was already served. He saw her toss off a glass of wine as if it had been water, without even taking a biscuit to counteract its after effects. Firenze he never even noticed. He remembered afterwards that there had been a frowsy-looking woman by her side in a large hat and thick veil, but he did not connect the two in any way. His eyes were fixed on Grey. She perhaps felt their power, for she turned and saw him. Then, if never before, he knew the full extent of her degradation. If ever there was guilt in a woman's face it was in hers in that moment of detection. That she had not sunk too low to feel shame the horror in her own eyes and the quick flush on her cheek showed him, but he, unhappily, forgot to notice the clearness of the one and the healthy bloom of the other.

His one idea was to escape as soon as possible. It was the first time that he had ever turned his back on a woman in trouble. He cared nothing whether she missed her train or not. It was on the point of starting, the porters were mostly standing idle in groups. He sent one for a cab. To Septimus' letter he gave not another thought: whatever he might have meant mattered little now.

For the next few months he led a mad life. That, at least, was the word which he would have used if asked afterwards to explain it away. Other men called him rational, and there was general rejoicing amongst his friends that he had at last come to his senses. He came out of his hermit-cell amidst universal rejoicing of men and women. One woman in particular had especial cause for rejoicing—Mrs. Copley, whom he allowed as full a share in his life as the proprieties permitted. He met her the very day that the crash came, driving in Piccadilly, though it was late in August, wearing a beautiful hand-painted gown. He stopped the carriage and spoke to her. If her complexion was hand-painted like the dress, it was also the work of an artist who conceals his art. She dined with him that night at Prince's. He dined with her the next, and in a few days they were on the old terms of intimacy. He made it brutally clear to her at the outset that marriage would not enter into the agreement, nor even the proxy passion for another woman which she went shamelessly near to demanding. Still she did not draw back. She was willing to face the thick aftermath of pain after the harvest was reaped. Desperation is death to pride in such women. She had waited for him so long that when she thought she had the chance of him, even second-hand with a pawn-ticket attached to his heart, she would not have hesitated to pay the price. The other women were also of his own world—smart leaders of Society, beautiful, accomplished, and faultlessly dressed in the fashion of *après-demain*. Each was competent to take care of herself according to her elastic moral standard, but never in his wildest moments did Howard lift a finger to attract a woman. One and all met him more than half way, only to be gently repulsed.

One night in the beginning of May he came in from

the play to find Coleman waiting for him. He was surprised but genuinely glad to see his bald head shining a welcome in the dimness. They had met constantly of late at "amateur gaffs," as the middle-man termed the various functions which depended on him greatly for success, but he was a busy man and seldom seen out of a crowd.

"Why, man! what possessed you to sit in the dark? Couldn't you turn the light on?"

"I never noticed. There was nobody about, so I found my own way up."

"Where's that villain Parker, I wonder? Out on the rampage, I suppose. Well, well, 'like master, like man.'"

Something between a yawn and a sigh escaped him. He went over to the table and mixed a couple of brandies and soda.

"I forgot. Perhaps you drink whisky?"

"Nothing for me, thanks. I seldom touch anything."

"Well, what's the news? Do you know the rights of the Graham case? What's this they say about a counter-charge?"

"I haven't come to gossip, old chap. I came to tell you something. You've never been on my books, as I might say, but I take an interest in you. Have you seen to-day's *Times*?"

"Not yet."

"Mrs. Beaumont died last week."

"Which Mrs. Beaumont?"

"Mrs. Alison-Beaumont."

"Really? Oh, I'm sorry, very sorry. She was one of the sweetest women I ever met. Poor old Beaumont! It'll be an awful knock for him, and poor Grey Alison, too. I don't know what she'll do without her."

He fetched the *Times* from a side-table.

"Poor little woman! only thirty-two. I wonder what was the matter?"

"You don't know, then?"

"No."

"I thought you didn't. That's why I came. It was drink."

"What?"

"She literally drank herself to death. It's been going on ever since she married, and it's only just killed her."

"I think you are mistaken."

"I'm not, indeed. My man told me of it that time we stopped there. She had an attack coming on the very night of the dance. He himself served her with champagne in the empty supper-room when they closed the door to clear away."

"Are you quite sure that you haven't mixed the two sisters? Coleman, I'm going to tell you something that I wouldn't breathe to another man living. I did know that there was a skeleton at Owlcliffe, but I'm afraid it's Miss Alison. Poor little Mrs. Beaumont confided it to me herself."

"It's a lie! a foul lie!"

"I would give ten years of my life to be able to tell you that I believe you. You have been misinformed. I would to Heaven that I could think otherwise. I loved Grey Alison. In all my wanderings she was the best thing that I ever found. We were engaged. Then she broke it off, but the reflection of her purity kept me straight years after it was all over."

"Why did she break it off?"

"She would never say. She chose to keep it a mystery, poor little thing! Now, of course, I know why she did it. In time people began to talk about her. I charged her with the thing one day. I wanted to help her, was willing to marry her just the same, but she

denied it indignantly, gave me the lie, and then in the face of everything took too much at supper."

"Yes; she was certainly a little noisy at supper; but oh! if only I had known then what I have just learnt I shouldn't be talking to you in bachelor diggings."

"I like you for standing up for her. She was worth it, and I would believe everything you say if I hadn't seen her drinking with my own eyes. We'll say that Mrs. Beaumont did it too, if you like, but unfortunately there can be no doubt about Grey. Why, the very last time I saw her she was drinking port amongst a lot of bagmen in the King's Cross refreshment-room."

"And I should think she needed it, poor thing! No, Howard, it won't work. Let us sift this affair to the bottom. It's worth it. If I stay here all night I'll make you see through my eyes. I'm not given much to listen to servants' tittle-tattle, so we'll put Maxwell out of court if you like, but the other day I met the Alisons' doctor's son. He told me even more than Maxwell. He made no secret of his admiration for Miss Alison, quite from a disinterested point of view, for he has been married happily for years. He says that the life she has led would have killed many women, and confesses that no man would have stood it. No nurse nor maid would stay longer than a few weeks. Last year even Beaumont himself left his wife. Then, one day, she tried to strangle her sister, and the poor girl ran straight out of the house and flung herself on the doctor's protection. Miss Alison narrowly escaped brain fever, but they patched her up and sent her down to the Thames—the first holiday she had had for ten years—and that was a short one. She was recalled at the end of a week or two to meet her sister in Town. Mrs. Beaumont had been seized with a sudden fad to see a specialist. He gave her six months to live, but she lingered till last week."

Howard sat perfectly still while Coleman was speaking, and when he finished was silent for a time trying to reconcile the whole thing with his own version.

"It's a terrible story. I can't blame her for doing it. Oh!" he cried, starting up and pacing the room, "if it weren't for that scene at supper and all that Mrs. Beaumont told me I could almost think that you were right. And if you were—if you were! Help me out, Coleman, if you can."

"I dismiss your interview with Mrs. Beaumont in a couple of words. She was not responsible for what she said that night, and she has never been known to stick at any lie which would further her own interests. If she had the slightest inkling that you cared for her sister she would have gone to any lengths to nip the affair in the bud. Had she?"

"I don't know. I asked her if the rumour were true. I had heard it first, you know, through Mrs. Copley."

"Mrs. Copley! An unprincipled woman, who was in love with you. I gave you credit for more knowledge of the mere rudiments of worldly wisdom. The thing's as plain as a pike-staff. Mrs. Beaumont simply took up the story where Mrs. Copley dropped it."

"Very well, I'll give you that in. Now we come to the supper."

"Yes, I remember the supper distinctly. I sat opposite to you and Miss Alison. I should have watched her intently in any case, even if she had not made herself conspicuous. From the moment that I set foot in that house I saw how it was with you and her. Since I had met you both at Mrs. Copley's something had happened. I would have given my head to know what, but whatever it was I could see that neither of you had changed towards the other. There are other things than wine that go to a woman's head. Had you been saying anything to her at the dance?"

"I had asked her quite gently if what I had heard were true, and she flew into a tantrum and denied it. I'm afraid that your view of the case will hardly hold water. If her sister's mantle had been thrown over her by mistake don't you see that she would have disowned it in an extreme case like that? She couldn't have kept silence then. It wouldn't have been human."

"I sometimes doubt if a good woman is quite human. Look here, Howard. Years ago I cruelly accused the best woman I ever knew of a worse sin than drink with fewer proofs than you have against Grey Alison. She neither reproached me nor attempted to justify herself. Petty explanation seemed superfluous, I suppose, when the man she loved believed the worst of her; but it killed her. I killed her. That's why I'm always trying to put other people on the lines when they get off. It's a sort of expiation."

Howard was staring into the fireplace with a far-away vacant expression. It was some time before he spoke again.

"Does the appearance of a woman who drinks hard suffer much?"

"Not for the first year or two, but when once it gets a hold they look repulsive. Young Hewitt told me that Mrs. Beaumont changed so that although he had known her all her life he would have passed her if he had met her unexpectedly."

"Grey's face has gained in beauty and strength every time I have seen her. It is the face of one refined in the furnace. I believe you now, Coleman. I believe you from my heart."

Coleman rose. He held out his hand.

"That's right. I must be off now. You will want a good rest before your journey."

"I am not fit to go to her."

"None of us are, but in common humanity you owe her an explanation. To-morrow's Sunday, but there is one good train. Good-night."

"And I forgot. I promised her that I would never go there again until she sent for me. Do you think that in a case like this I might break my word?"

"Because you haven't had a sixpenny wire from her? Howard, I happen to know that that woman is alone in that large house, with all the sad business of the funeral arrangements on her shoulders. Is there no such thing at such times as a direct summons from soul to soul?"

"Coleman! how on earth can I thank you? What is there that I can ever do to repay you for this night's work?"

"Only one thing."

"What is it?"

"Ask me to your wedding."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

We had a remarkable sunset one day last November. The sun at last, just before setting, after a cold grey day reached a clear stratum in the horizon, and the softest, brightest, morning sunlight fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees. It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene, that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow. When we reflected that this was not a solitary phenomenon never to happen again, but that it would happen for ever and ever, an infinite number of evenings, and cheer and reassure the latest child that walked there, it was more glorious still.

—THORBAU.

THE promise of spring, like the promise of love, is sometimes broken. That year Nature kept her word to the letter. There was no hitch in any part of the great mechanism. The blue scillas sprang out of their warm bed betimes, followed later by languid, pale-faced narcissi; the spiky stubble like a week's beard was evolved into green lily leaves, the lilacs and laburnums met again in close embrace, and the woods were fragrant with the faint incense of Grey's favourite pink-may, "doll's roses" as she called them. Owlcliffe surpassed itself in beauty in the first few days after Firenze's death, but it gave little pleasure to the forlorn woman whom in the past it had moved almost to tears.

There was no one to share with her the joys of wood and garden. She was an intruder there, tolerated, not welcome. The cuckoo sang their praises between ardu-

ous house-hunts, the thrush thinly veiled his love for his prospective mate in tuneful odes to the same. Everything worked in couples, and she was odd man out. When the Sunday came she felt the loneliness most. She had faced church in the morning from behind the curtains of the old square pew, but even-song with the inevitable funeral sermon would be beyond endurance. When the bell began to ring she was half-way through the wood on her way to the point known as Shallowbeck End. She passed two of the servants with their young men, and within fifty yards put up three pair of partridges. Seated on the bare crags overlooking the heads of the fir trees she was again an eavesdropper to the continuous love-making of wood-pigeon and blackbird. She had long learnt to distinguish their different languages, and had wished often that she might understand what they said. Now she had little doubt. Everything around her seemed to speak the great Volapuk, but she must talk to herself or not at all.

She seated herself on the top of the highest rock, and looked down at the vast landscape below. By such a view might even the Man of Sorrows have been tempted. It was a fair sample of the world, that stretch of land, for within walls looking no larger than toy-houses from that height, youth and beauty and brains of the first water were often to be found.

She had had the chance of it once. There had been a niche for her to fill which would now be taken by another. Her place was gone beyond recall, but even now she could not bear to think what it had cost her to frame the words "Get thee behind me, Satan." He had offered her his wares so prettily dressed that at first, with pure love embossed on every side, she had almost overlooked the mark of the cloven hoof. So with each retail purchaser of experience. Until he comes to the counter

he expects to find temptation unmistakable and hideous, so takes it often unawares in the guise of dainty *bric-à-brac*.

Grey began to wonder what would become of her. Her brother-in-law might be expected any time within the next month, and until he came she could make no plans. The property, she supposed, in default of an heir would revert to her; but if Beaumont had a wish to live there she determined not to stand in his way. She did not mind whether she went or stayed. Every place, even the beloved old home, must be much the same to her in future, London excepted. Whatever pressure might be put on her she would never settle there with the voice of the past grating on her ear like a gramophone.

"Oh! to see the end of it all," she said aloud. It was not like her to wish for a peep at the last page. Hitherto, her sweet, old-fashioned theory had convinced her that all would come right at the close. It had never been known to fail yet, and though the thought that perhaps it might be thought fit to show her the solitary exception to prove the rule, the seeds of faith had too strong a hold on her for complete eradication. A simple prayer came into her heart. A plea for ever such a small measure of peace, before her youth went for ever. Then she rose and climbed slowly down to the foot of the crags.

Up the narrow path a man was walking hurriedly. A better-class man who might stop and offer well-meant condolence, and she was in no mood for it. She stepped quickly behind a drooping mountain ash. If he had chanced to see her he could but respect her wish for solitude at such a time. He was quite close to her. She heard the fir-cones crackling under his tread. He stopped when he reached her hiding-place. She pulled

aside the green shutter to peep at him. He was facing her. Another woman would have cried aloud if only from surprise. Grey only stepped slowly on to the path. It was Howard.

He bared his head, and for the first time in his life failed to look her straight in the eyes. Grey could not speak at first. She stood gazing her fill at the loved face.

"I know all," he said, "what have you to say to me?"

"I never blamed you. In your place, with such meshes of strong evidence on all sides, I think, perhaps, that I might almost have thought the same of you."

"Don't pin your faith on me. I am no longer worth it."

A spasm of pain crossed her face. She went on hurriedly—

"Who told you about everything?"

"No one has told me for certain. It was dear old Coleman who helped to tear the veil from my eyes until I saw clearly again."

"Then, perhaps, you would like some sort of an explanation. After that the subject must be a sealed book."

"I don't need another word of explanation, but if you could bring yourself to tell me the whole sad story once and for always I should like to hear it."

"Very well; shall we sit down, it's not damp."

Briefly, without any padding, she told him all from the beginning, but from the rough synopsis he gathered much of the pith. She answered one or two leading questions also in the same business-like way, which threw even more light upon the truth.

"I don't know how on earth you stood it," he cried vehemently.

She smiled sadly.

"You, perhaps, know the story of the hedgehog that, hard pressed by the dogs, climbed the nearest tree. A child exclaimed, 'But I thought that a hedgehog couldn't climb trees?' Then comes the moral, 'The hedgehog had to.'"

He sat with averted eyes, digging his stick into the moss at their feet. He was strangely distant, and there was one thing that Grey told herself she must know.

"You have asked me a question. I should like to ask another, if I may? There is no reason, I suppose, why we should not be friends because we once fancied ourselves something more? You spoke just now as if you had done something to be ashamed of. What is it? Have you, too, taken to drinking too much, or has ambition for your work led you into a worldly marriage?"

"No; neither. As far as two great snares of wine and woman are concerned, I suppose I have led what is called a straight life. I have never singled any woman out for admiration, but when they have proved willing to flirt with me I have not hung back. It was not, perhaps, a great matter; men years my junior—boys even—would not give it a thought, but what rankles is the thought that while you were keeping a terrible death-watch I was fooling my time away in London ball-rooms with a lot of senseless dolls who ——"

Grey laid her hand upon his lips.

"Are you happy?" she asked faintly.

"Happy? Oh, Grey! can you ask that? Apart from the remorse for the great wrong that I have done you is this later knowledge of a great chance lost by my own folly. If it were not for that don't you see that I should at least have had as much right as any man to come to you and ask you to be my wife?"

"Why would you have asked me? To make amends, or ——?"

"Because I love you. Because I never ceased to love you, even when I believed the worst."

"And couldn't you ask me still?"

He turned and looked at her.

"You mean it?"

"Yes. I have no feeling about these other women. It was not your love for them, but your love for me which made you—to put it strongly—a bit wild. There's no offence, dear. It's a case of what the magistrates call white gloves. Won't you take me, Charlie?"

"Grey!"

"I'm not asking it for your sake, but only for my own. You ought to marry some young girl full of life and spirits. I know that, but I can't help it. I've dragged out a miserable existence all these years without you, but I can't live without you any longer. I can't! I can't!"

The birds no longer had it all their own way. There was new music in the air, the sound of a happy, girlish laugh.

"Do you know what people will say when they hear about it? 'And Grey Alison is actually going to be married after all to a widower! Very unromantic, but, of course, she is not as young as she was.'"

"But you don't mind?"

"Mind? I don't feel as if I could ever mind anything again. Do you?"

"There's only one thing that I mind at the present time. My darling, do you know that you haven't kissed me yet?"

"Haven't I? I think that I have almost forgotten how. They say, you know, that when a starving man is shown bread for the first time he cannot touch it."

He put his hand under her chin and turned up her face to his in the old way.

"Then I must teach you."

At sundown they sauntered home. The old literal translation of the word would not be out of place. Each for years had been bound for *la Terre sainte*. Alone, by different routes, they had set out on the pilgrimage. If the man had proved the worse truant he had also met with the worse temptations. But now that their roads were the same there would be no turning back nor loitering by the way. Snares and pitfalls would still abound for both, as in the past. The only difference would be that they would finish the Crusade together. Yet the difference would be great.







